

BULGARIA

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BILHA BRYANT
Citizen
Dupnitza (1934-1948)

Bilha Bryant was born in 1934 in Bulgaria. Bryant served in the Israeli Army and worked in the private sector before joining the Israeli Foreign Service in 1959. Bryant resigned from the Israeli Foreign Service and married Edward (Ted) Bryant in 1963. With her husband, Bryant was assigned overseas to Mozambique, Ethiopia, Pakistan, Korea and India. Bryant then began to work for the State Department and served in the Soviet Bureau, Eastern European Affairs and Congressional Relations. Bryant was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1998.

Q: Today is February 23, 1998. This is an interview with Bilha Bryant. It's being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training. I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy, and Bilha and I are old friends. Bilha, could you tell me when and where you were born and tell us something about your family?

BRYANT: I was born in Dupnitza, a small town in the foothills of the Rila Mountains in Tsigonian, Bulgaria, in 1934. We lived there until our semi-forced immigration to Israel, four years after the Communists took over.

Q: Tell me about your family in Bulgaria and what you remember, because you were 10 years old, weren't you?

BRYANT: Yes. But I remember quite a bit.

Q: First tell me about your family, what your family was involved in.

BRYANT: My paternal side, Sephardim (Spanish Jews), had lived in Bulgaria since the exile from Spain. The family tried to observe Jewish traditions but knew very little about Jewish religion and did not really practice it regularly. My father was in a profession that was not deemed at the time "Jewish." It involved travel to villages and farms and very close contact with peasants who were all Christians. He was a tobacco grower and exporter. My maternal grandfather, whom I never knew since he died before I was born, was a miller and also dealt with

Bulgarian farmers. I do remember my maternal grandmother; tall, slim and beautiful, and rather sad. Rumors were that she was not purely Jewish. After the death of her husband, she was obliged to move in, for periods of 6 months a year, with her two sons and their families. My paternal family was large and close-knit, but not very happy, with a great deal of family feuding. The extreme hierarchy in the family touched all of us, but mostly the women.

Q: I take it there wasn't the equivalent of - I may be mispronouncing this - a shtetl - in Bulgaria, a Jewish enclave, a small village or something like that?

BRYANT: Bulgarian Jews were assimilated into the society and did not stand out as Jews. They didn't speak Yiddish or go to the synagogue, except for the High Holy Days. My own father had a lot of Christian friends from all levels of society. It was not the same sort of Jewish community you saw in Poland or the Ukraine. The old generation spoke Ladino, an ancient form of Spanish from the 14th-century when Queen Isabella kicked the Jews out of Spain.

The separation was mainly economic: poor people lived across the river and very few (before Communism) were able to "cross the bridge." We visited the house I grew up in Dupnitsa. We left Bulgaria in November '48 and, as I said, left everything behind. And now, 50 years later, there they were: the same sofa, the same table and chairs, everything as we left it. The family that had taken over the house continued to live there all these years. It was so eerie.

Q: How about schooling?

BRYANT: Jewish children had to attend segregated Jewish elementary schools. Looking back I am not sure why, since we were not taught anything very Jewish, such as the Old Testament or Hebrew and when we reached middle school, Jews and Christians attended the same schools and got along fine.

Q: You say you left there when, about '45 or so?

BRYANT: No, we actually left in November of '48.

Q: Well then, what about Bulgaria during the war years, because Bulgaria was an ally of the Germans, of the Nazis, and of course, everyone knows what the Nazis were doing to Jews? Did this impact on Bulgaria?

BRYANT: Comparatively speaking, Bulgarian Jews were very lucky. The combination of the reluctance of Tzar (King) Boris to allow our deportation, and practically a miracle, saved the Bulgarian Jews from the fate of the rest of the Jews in Europe.

Q: What about your father's business?

BRYANT: According to the new Nazi law - The Law for the Defense of the Nation- Jews were not allowed to own rural property, own or manage a commercial firm, so on. And this is what happened to my father's business. It was taken over by his Christian partner with no compensation whatsoever.

Q: What type of government was there in Bulgaria then?

BRYANT: It was, of course, a monarchy with a pro-Nazi, Fascist government. I don't really remember who the Prime Minister was at the time, but I know that he was closely allied with the Nazis and followed their policies. A new law required that all Jews register, declare all their properties and possessions, and deposit all their money in blocked bank accounts. We were also made to take Jewish names. For example, in my case, I was known as Bili Mosheva but had to delete the "va" and become Bili Moshe. This law also prohibited Jews from voting, holding public office, employing non-Jewish domestic help, a curfew between the hours of 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., and the most devastating of all, all Jewish men between the ages of 20 to 40 were sent to army labor camps.

The same fascist government also agreed to allow the Germans to use Bulgarian railroads to deport Jews from Macedonia, Greece, and Yugoslavia. Dupnitsa was on a main railway from Macedonia and I will never forget the cries for help coming from the box cars, always in the middle of the night. We knew they were being sent to concentration camps, but we never imagined what was happening in the camps.

Apparently, Hitler was becoming very angry with the King for refusing to follow with his policy on the "Jewish solution" and for resisting to send Bulgarian forces into Greece. He wanted an urgent face-to-face meeting. The day after the King returned from Germany, he fell ill and died a few days later of undetermined causes. Rumors were that he had been poisoned. I remember watching the train carrying the King's body for burial in the Rila Monastery passing through Dupnitsa. Thousands of people were lining the tracks, crying. Jews were crying not only for their protector but also for the fate that will befall them after his death.

Q: Do you remember when that happened?

BRYANT: I am not sure. I think in the summer of 1943.

Q: And then what happened?

BRYANT: Things become worse for us. The Fascist government supported by the King's brother, Cyril, could now freely deport the Sofia Jews to the provincial towns where they had relatives so that they could stay with them and not disrupt the housing market. We seemed to have quite a few relatives who lived in Sofia, because our modest house became a home to about 30 relatives. A family occupied every room in the house, including the living rooms and we all shared three kitchens. Despite the horrible conditions, the lack of food, and the fear of the future, I clearly remember the love and kindness that prevailed in the house, especially towards us children. As it happened, the evacuation spared the Jews from Sofia from the horrific bombing by the British, which caused a great deal of damage and many casualties in the capital.

But then, one beautiful summer day in Dupnitsa, something terrible happened; I remember being on our small balcony with my brother and cousins watching the British planes pass over the town (not for the first time), "just like silver birds." We yelled at the top of our voices "Please come

and save us, we love you," and then we saw tens of bombs coming down on Dupnitsa. Houses, perhaps quarter of a mile way, were hit, dust and smoke raised over the town and screams, which I still remember with horror, were heard all over the town. The bitter irony of it all was that about 40 Jews, living as we did in the same house, were killed. We learned later that Dupnitsa was not the actual target but because their original target was impossible to hit, they decided to get rid of the bombs over our town. After the bombing we all ran from our homes at the first sound of the alarm. Dupnitsa, being built in a deep valley between high hills, had very few places to hide. One of them was the railway tunnel, which was used as bomb shelter, but Jews were not allowed there. So we hid under trees and bushes and hoped for the best.

Q: How were you following the war news in all this?

BRYANT: BBC transmitted every evening in Bulgarian. As soon as the broadcast started, everyone gathered around the radio and even the little ones sat quietly listening to the news, which if I remember correctly described the battles being fought and later won by the allies. But, in 1942 Jews were ordered to deliver all radio sets to the authorities as part of the "Law for the Defense of the Nation." We all knew that this was only the beginning and got information wherever we could get it.

And then, on March 8, 1943 rumors reached our community that the government has agreed to the Germans' demands to deport Bulgarian Jews to concentration camps in Germany. I remember well the terror and the helplessness we all felt, even the children. And indeed on March 9th we were ordered to "pack a small bag with personal belongings for each member of the family, since you may be sent to different locations." I remember that day so well, but not as if it was happening to me, but as if I were watching a movie. While my mother was packing each of us a small bag, tears rolling down her cheeks, my father decided to swallow his pride and go and beg his Christian partner to "please take my children away and hide them with friends in one of the villages." The reply was "I couldn't endanger my family by saving your children. But you know I have always liked the silver candlesticks in your home. You won't need them any longer. Could I have them?"... My father came home heartbroken: this was his friend and his partner of 30 years.

Q: And then what happened?

BRYANT: We gathered in the living room and decided to eat up all the food we had "stashed away for bad times" while we had the opportunity. There was a lot of hugging and crying and all sorts of advice, "in case anyone survives." At 10 a.m. on March 10, which was my birthday, there was a knock on our door and we were told that we were allowed to leave the house and that our deportation has been postponed. I didn't remember that myself, but my parents told me that there was another attempt to deport the Bulgarian Jews, but this time "a miracle" happened. Trains were otherwise engaged in transporting soldiers and ammunition to the front.

By the way, not one Bulgarian Jew was sent to the death camps. There are a lot of conflicting stories about Boris, but the fact remains that he had the courage to stand up to Hitler and to refuse our deportation. I honestly think that without King Boris and his supporters, the Bulgarian Jews would have been doomed.

Q: Well now, there was this peculiar thing that Bulgaria never declared war on the United States, I think. Wasn't that it?

BRYANT: Indeed, and it is even stranger that Bulgaria never declared war on the Soviet Union. Apparently, when the war broke out, Bulgaria wanted to keep its neutrality, but Hitler didn't like that a bit and pressured King Boris to join the pact between Japan, Italy, and Germany. The King refused, but when Germany offered to return to Bulgaria territories lost during the First World War, he agreed that his country would become only a passive ally to the Germans. But, Bulgaria became an ally all the same.

Q: As a Bulgarian, how did you look upon the United States?

BRYANT: As Bulgarian Jews we were praying for America and England to win the war and save us. They were like gods to us; I remember it so well. I seem to have known a lot about the United States, but I honestly don't know how.

Q: Weren't there movies? This was a sort of common culture throughout all of Europe. Gary Cooper and...

BRYANT: Yes, you are right. We did go to movies at every opportunity. The good, handsome American men in the movies symbolized for us decency and heroism. Bulgarian Jews worshiped Roosevelt himself. So it was especially painful to me to read his letters in the Holocaust Museum about the "low priority for the United States on saving the European Jews."

Q: What about the end of the war when the Soviet army came? Did that impact on you all?

BRYANT: Very much so. Bulgarians in general and the Jews in particular, received the Soviet soldiers as Bulgaria's saviors. In fact, there were many Jewish partisans that fought side by side with the Soviets. Later on, many of them became Communist Party leaders.

With time, the general situation in the country further deteriorated. Bulgaria was always considered as "the fruit and vegetable garden of the Balkans." But just after a year of the Communist regime, there was no fruit or vegetables to be had. The main reason was that everything was being sent to the Soviet Union. Another reason was that the farmers of the newly established "collective farms" were paid so poorly, that they had no incentive to produce more for the domestic market.

Politically, the worsening situation had a great impact on my own family as well. The new government blamed "the rich" for exploiting the proletariat. The authorities began getting involved in my father's business and looking for reasons to intimidate him. Not long after that, his business was nationalized. In school, children were indoctrinated into the Communist Youth Party and encouraged to report on anyone who spoke against the regime, including family members.

Q: You were how old? Let's see... '34, they came about '44. Let's say about 10.

BRYANT: About 10. Old enough. And I was fascinated by communism and became a very devoted little Pioneer girl. The communists gave me the opportunity to get involved in writing

and the theater. I was in seventh heaven and my parents were horrified.

Q: You had a red kerchief and...

BRYANT: I wore a uniform, too. I was asked to read poems and write speeches on Stalin, Dimitrov, and the great promises of communism.

Q: Did thing change at all around '48, when Yugoslavia decided to break away? Did you feel any impact of that?

BRYANT: I remember the many Yugoslav children coming to Bulgaria as youth exchange. And then one day, they were no longer our "brothers and sisters." But there was no other impact that I remember.

Life had become unbearable for my parents. They worried that my father could be arrested at any time and that, God forbid, I might become a real communist. At that point they started exploring the possibility of leaving Bulgaria. As a first step, they arranged that my brother, then 15, leave Bulgaria for Palestine, with a group of 40 Jewish boys and girls. They left Bulgaria via Turkey and Syria. The trip took over two months because of all sorts of border crossing difficulties.

Q: Was this a legal thing?

BRYANT: It was legal, both leaving Bulgaria and entering Palestine, but I don't know the details.

Q: Were you a part of this group?

BRYANT: No, my brother was.

Q: This was when, about '46, '47.

BRYANT: In '46. It was before Israel's Independence. So he went. He was only 15 years old and the family missed him terribly. But we knew that his departure would be the impetus for us all to join him in Palestine. When in May of 1948 Israel was declared independent, "shlichim" (emissaries) came to Bulgaria to encourage Jews to immigrate to Israel. My parents and many of their friends from Dupnitza decided to go. We had to leave everything behind - we only took what we could carry. And I never went back to Bulgaria until 1997 when I visited there with my husband and brother and his wife.

RAYMOND F. COURTNEY
Vice Consul
Sofia (1947-1950)

Raymond Courtney was born in 1908 and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma. He attended

Harvard College and Harvard Business School before working with the Dupont Company in Wilmington, Delaware. During the Second World War he joined the Navy and was assigned to the amphibious forces and the Office of Naval Intelligence. Courtney entered the Foreign Service in 1947 and served in Bulgaria, United Kingdom, Cyprus, and Canada. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on March 4, 1992.

Q: Now, your first assignment overseas was very interesting. Could you tell me where you went and what you were doing?

COURTNEY: When I received my commission as a Foreign Service Officer, I asked for an Eastern European assignment and was sent to Bulgaria. I got there in the fall of 1947. The Legation had been reopened for about a year before that. I went as a vice consul working principally on political observation and reporting and such consular business that we had to do. As you well know, that was a very turbulent time. The Communist regime was well established, of course, but it had not as yet managed to clamp the iron curtain down thoroughly so we had an opportunity to test the limits to which we could go.

We were able to move about the country somewhat freely, but we did not succeed in having any very good personal contact with the people of Bulgaria because by that time it was too dangerous, it was fatal for them.

For example, Donald Heath, the Minister, was the only one of us, that I can recall, who was able to hire a tutor to try to learn some Bulgarian. That person was allowed to do that without jeopardy. But for the rest of us, no one dared to take us on in that close a relationship. They didn't dare to speak to us on the street. So I didn't learn any real Bulgarian and I don't think any of my other colleagues did either below the level of the Minister.

But, as I said, we did move around the country. There were some restricted areas where we didn't venture, in particular the southern border with Greece and Turkey. Otherwise, from time to time, we could go up into the mountains, up to a resort, Chamkorea, about 50 miles from Sofia. I got down to the Black Sea, to Varna a couple of times. So we were able to see and observe in the country to that extent, but our personal contact was very limited.

Bit by bit the regime did succeed in clamping down on us and restricting our activities.

Q: Why was Bulgaria more Soviet than the Soviets?

COURTNEY: Well, the poor old Bulgars tried to get on the winning side and always had the bad luck of being on the losing side. They had been pretty complaisant with the Nazis. I don't think they were too much actively engaged in military action, but they didn't resist the Germans. Then, I guess it was three days after the German capitulation, the Russians declared war on Bulgaria and immediately moved Dimitrov and the others with substantial military force right into Bulgaria.

Q: Bulgaria had basically been untouched by the war, hadn't it?

COURTNEY: Yes. I don't think there had been any action there...unlike Yugoslavia.

Q: When you were there, this was during the time that Tito was breaking with Stalin and Bulgaria, of course, being a Stalinist state par excellence and having a border with Yugoslavia, did you see any change in the way they were treating them because of this action?

COURTNEY: So far as one could judge, by now they were envious of the success of Tito in Yugoslavia in breaking the dominant hold. Other than that, I don't know that it affected relationships between the two countries.

Q: Our Minister when you were there was Donald Heath, with whom I served later in Saudi Arabia. Could you describe how he saw the situation and what was the attitude of the United States towards Bulgaria, as far as you could see?

COURTNEY: The official relationship was fairly cool, I think. Heath made it clear as well as he could that the United States greatly deplored the Communist regime and the way it was taking over, exploiting and suppressing the country. But beyond that, there was not a great deal that the Minister of our Legation or any of the others could do. We were well united in our efforts to contend with the Bulgarian suppression to the extent that we could, but, as I say, that was limited. You doubtless know the story of how we broke relations.

Q: Well, will you tell it for the record. How did this come about?

COURTNEY: In the course of time it became time for one of those Communist purges of their own hierarchy. The number two man to Georgi Dimitrov was Traicho Kostov. They concocted the fantasy that Donald Heath and Kostov had conspired to supplant Dimitrov. Mr. Heath had been able to learn some Bulgarian but not enough to carry on such a conversation. Kostov had no English or French, he had only Bulgarian and Russian. So the fantasy that he and Heath had gotten together and plotted was ridiculous.

The United States government asked that the Bulgarian government retract these charges against Heath. They refused to do so. That and a number of other issues of contention brought us to the decision to sever relations.

Now, a particular incident that contributed to that was the fate of our head translator. This is a very tragic event and one of several tragedies of the time. This was Michael Shipkov. He was a fine young fellow, educated at Roberts College. . .

Q: Roberts College being a Protestant school in Turkey.

COURTNEY: Yes. He had been an officer in the Bulgarian Army. After the armistice, the Armistice Control Commission took over for the Allied Forces for about a year and he was detailed from the Bulgarian Army to the Staff of the British general who was a member of the Armistice Control Commission. When the ACC was withdrawn and legations were established, Shipkov came to the American Legation as our head translator. He was in that position when I

joined the Legation and was there through the rest of the time, but in the course of time he was very much fingered by the Communist regime. The secret police took him in one weekend and worked him over and told him that if he told us anything about it that was his finish. Well, he came to me and told us. A few months later they did it again. This time we put him up in the attic of the Legation and the poor guy was there the rest of the time. We did our best to get permission for him to be evacuated from the country legally, but we didn't succeed. So that was a contributing factor to the decision to sever relations.

The time came that we had to try to save him by getting him out clandestinely. We asked the CIA in Washington to give us a plan and some assistance, perhaps, in getting Shipkov out of the country. They came back with a really childish, impossible scheme. Have him set out on the road by night and make his way, not by road but cross country over the mountains with five or six feet of snow, and make his way down to the Greek border and try to make a clandestine meeting in a graveyard there.

By this time I had made some acquaintances down in Istanbul and enlisted the help of an American businessman who was retired there and who was very knowledgeable having lived in the Balkans for a long time. Also, with some help from a member of the British Legation, who was actually a secret service man. From his sources he was able to provide us with some false papers for Shipkov and Archie Walker down in Istanbul was able to send a couple of couriers across.

So came almost the last night, I put Shipkov out on the road about 3 o'clock in the morning and sent the poor guy on his way. Well, he made the first safe house all right and the second safe house, but then the couriers didn't turn up and he didn't want to compromise his hosts any further so he tried to set out on his own without any guidance or assistance. The militia picked him up. We learned later that the reason the couriers had not shown was that they had both gone down with flu and had laid over 24 hours in a haystack. Shipkov's capture was announced over the State radio with a great blare of publicity. Shipkov was given a very, very bad time. After 15 years of that he was released from prison and allowed to live in exile in Troyan. He died in 1990.

Q: When you all departed from Bulgaria, where did you go?

COURTNEY: This was early in 1950. I went to London.

HARRY W. SHLAUDEMAN
Bulgarian Language Training
Washington, DC (1958)

Consular Officer
Sofia (1959-1962)

Harry H. Shlaudeman was born in 1926 and raised in California. He received his BA from Stanford University before joining the Marine Corps. He joined the

Foreign Service in 1955 and served in Colombia, Bulgaria, the Dominican Republic, and Chile. In addition he served as Assistant Secretary for Inter-American Affairs and as Ambassador to Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, and Nicaragua. He was interviewed by William E. Knight on May 24th and June 1, 1993.

SHLAUDEMANN: I opted -- as we were all being urged to do -- for a hard language and ended up taking Bulgarian and went to Bulgaria when we reopened the post in 1960. It was an interesting tour. It was the only tour I had outside of Latin America. We were there during the erection of the Berlin Wall, the Chinese-Soviet Break.

Q: How much time did you spend on the Bulgarian language study?

SHLAUDEMANN: I spent 10 months learning Bulgarian. Another interesting thing that happened to me after I finished - We were closed in Bulgaria - we had been closed 10 years, and Foy Kohler had negotiated our re-entry into Bulgaria. We were waiting because we had no facilities there, no place. During the interval, after I'd finished the language, I found myself as Secretary of the Style Committee on the Antarctic Conference which wrote the Antarctic Treaty.

In any case, I went to Bulgaria. From Bulgaria, I was declared - I was PNGed [*persona non grata*] out of Bulgaria after slightly more than 2 years. This was in retaliation for our PNGing a Bulgarian officer in their mission in New York.

Q: Spying, I suppose?

SHLAUDEMANN: No, actually, I think he was blackmailing some Bulgarian immigrant. I came back to the Department - I had meant to stay a third year.

Q: Just a question about being PNGed and what that involved - how upsetting or otherwise it was. What actually happened?

SHLAUDEMANN: What happened was that when we expelled this Bulgarian, it was obvious - we all knew in the Mission that somebody would be the object of retaliation and the question was *who*. This fellow was a First Secretary and I was a Second Secretary. We had one First Secretary there and we thought that he would probably be expelled. However, they picked me, I think, because I was a Bulgarian Language Officer and I had a number of Bulgarian friends.

Q: And the First Secretary was not?

SHLAUDEMANN: No, he was a USIA Officer and really, I'm sure they regarded him as harmless. In any case, I'm sure this was one of the few times, if not the only time in the history of the Service, that an officer has interpreted his own PNGing. I accompanied the Chief of Mission to the session in which this fellow explained that I would have to leave. He refused to look at me during this conversation. In any case, I came back from there without a job, very much at loose ends, and there was nothing for me in Eastern Europe.

Q: *Did you have family with you in Bulgaria?*

SHLAUDEMANN: Yes, but my wife had left, came back here to have our second child in the late fall of 1961, and I actually left in 1962. While I was here - while I was in California - they were looking for a Political Officer to go to Santo Domingo, and through the intervention of Bob Hurwitch I got that job. This really was the most significant assignment of my career. I was the Chief Political Officer for two years, and then I came back and was the Dominican Desk Officer when we sent the Marines and later the 82nd Airborne into Santo Domingo. Then I went back and spent, basically, a year and a half during the negotiations with Ellsworth Bunker and others.

NICHOLAS G. ANDREWS
Albania and Bulgaria Desk Officer
Washington, DC (1962-1965)

Nicholas G. Andrews was born in 1924 in Romania and came to live in Massachusetts fifteen years later. He attended Princeton University and served in the Army. He entered the Foreign Service in 1950. His overseas posts include Yugoslavia, Turkey; and he twice served in Poland. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on April 12, 1990.

Q: *You left Yugoslavia in 1961, and then you came back and I have you on the Bulgarian-Albanian desk from '62 to '63, and then you were on the Yugoslav desk, '63 to '65. What was our major interest first with Bulgaria and Albania? In Albania we didn't have anything going.*

ANDREWS: No, we didn't have anything going, and about the only thing that we received was some mail from Albanian American organizations in the United States, and maybe a newspaper or so, which I couldn't read but I passed on, if they were not available to INR.

Q: *Intelligence and Research.*

ANDREWS: . . . where Steve Peters, a long-time employee there, was of Albanian extraction and knew the Balkans extraordinarily well, and so he was a great source of information on Albania; what all these Albanian organizations in the United States were doing, and saying.

Q: *Might I add parenthetically, on the radio as I came in this morning I heard that AT&T said they have now opened up so people from Albania, for the first time since ever, can call directly to the United States, and next month people from the United States will be able to direct dial to Albania. We have no relations with the country, but it just shows you that haven't changed much in this period. Was there much interest in Bulgaria?*

ANDREWS: No. Bulgaria, unfortunately, plays a minimal role in U.S. thinking about European issues, or even about Eastern European issues. There was a little bit more interest then because, although there were no Soviet troops in Bulgaria, there was general assumption that there were a number of Soviet officers in the Ministry of Defense, and so forth. And that Bulgaria could in a

very short period of time become a threat to Greece and Turkey if things got heated up. So there was that kind of an interest as far as Bulgaria was concerned. We generally, I think, took the Yugoslav side in Yugoslav-Bulgarian disputes concerning Macedonian minority, and things of this kind. We generally thought that the Yugoslavs made a better case.

I think during my time on the desk a new Ambassador went out, Eugenie Anderson, who was a political appointee from Minnesota. She had been Ambassador to Denmark earlier, I think. And she, I found, was a very pleasant person to deal with, quite confident in her own abilities.

Q: She was Ambassador in '49 to Denmark, and then actually was Minister to Bulgaria in 1962.

ANDREWS: So I went through the process of briefing her, and making the appointments necessary for her to get her squared away, and I thought that she did very well. I think her experience in Denmark must have helped, even though she obviously was going into a different kind of situation. One of the strange things is that when she got there she found USIA officer Alex Bloomfield, who was one of the guys dealing with the Russian translation and interpretation in Bucharest in 1944 to '46. So there he was with his, of course, fluent Polish, fluent Russian, pretty fluent German, pretty fluent French, and rather shaky American, interpreting for her when she dealt with Bulgarians and Russian in Bulgaria. I think that caused some trouble with the Political Section which thought he was too close to her, and they were too far from her. But she was very active in that way, and saw a lot of people, talked to a lot of people, et cetera.

One of the things I raised with her was whether it was possible to get the Bulgarians to stop harping on the threat from Greece and Turkey to Bulgaria, because I thought there it was just not necessary for them to be quite so violent on the topic. And they were, in their words, they were violent on the issue. I told her I thought that there was no reason why Bulgaria, and Greece, and Turkey, couldn't get along better. I didn't know if there was any opportunity for her in a private conversation with the Foreign Minister, or somebody like that, to try to get across the fact that we would welcome some slowing down of this verbal war, which didn't seem to do anybody any good. She thought that was rather unlikely, but she would keep it in mind. And I gather that she was able once to have such a quiet meeting with the Foreign Minister who made the usual excuses as to why the Bulgarians were fearful. But within a relatively short time the situation in Greece changed. There was a change of government, and the Bulgarians, I think, were clever enough to see that the situation had changed, and they could change their tone, and something might come of that. And, in fact, it did. During the '60s Bulgarian relations with Greece improved a great deal, and it's very difficult to think in terms of a threat from either side since about the late '60s. I don't know to what extent my idea had anything to do with it, but it seemed that this was a non-productive kind of war. There were all kinds of problems between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, but I didn't quite see why Bulgarians and Turks had to be at each other's throat.

ROBERT B. HOUSTON
Acting Deputy Chief of Mission

Sofia (1962-1964)

Deputy Chief of Mission Sofia (1970-1973)

Robert Houston received a master's degree from the University of Indiana. During World War II, he was a radio engineer at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, DC. He entered the Foreign Service in 1945 and his overseas career included posts in Gold Coast, Germany, Austria, Scotland, Poland, Canada, Finland, Russia, and Bulgaria. Mr. Houston was interviewed by Ambassador Horace G. Torbert on May 14, 1990.

Q: Were there any outstanding highlights of that year or contacts that you made?

HOUSTON: Well, Bob Burns was the head of the Soviet and Eastern European Institute at the time. He was an old RFB hand. I had as my advisor one of the Czechoslovak Benes; he may have been a nephew of Jan Benes. We had on the faculty at that time Robert C. Tucker, who later moved to Princeton. As it turned out, we had both gone to the same high school in Kansas City. He had been a few years ahead of me so I had not known him. Bob Tucker had been assigned to the embassy in Moscow. He had married a Russian girl and ultimately was able to bring her entire family over. We got to know his Russian-born wife well and *mamoush*, the grandmother.

And this all became so relevant for us when we were assigned to the Soviet Union some 18 years later. At the time I was at Indiana, I wrote a thesis, based on my Polish experience, on the German-Polish frontier. Today everyone accepts the Oder-Neisse line. Back in 1961, the Line was not nearly an accepted boundary. I assumed that I was going to be assigned from Bloomington to Belgrade where I would run into Richard Earle Johnson again. He was then in Belgrade as a political officer. But as so often happens in the Foreign Service, near the end of my academic year, there was a PNG action [*persona non grata*], as a result of which I was moved to Sofia. I was very disappointed at first. Belgrade was a bigger post and Yugoslavia was not a hard-line Communist state, whereas Bulgaria was one of the most rigid of the Warsaw Pact states. If people caught cold in Moscow, Bulgarians would sneeze in Sofia, and that sort of thing. But Sofia turned out to be a good assignment, we got there in July of 1962.

Q: Was it still a legation then?

HOUSTON: It was a legation. Our minister was Mrs. Eugenie Anderson, a big figure on the Democratic National Committee from Minnesota, who had been Truman's ambassador in Denmark. She was quite a savvy person, very much public affairs oriented. She had been the supporter of Hubert Humphrey rather than John Kennedy. If she had been the supporter of Kennedy she might have gotten an embassy other than Sofia. She did have good relations with Averell Harriman, another Democratic stalwart. Thanks to her connections with Averell Harriman, we were able to get the Department to pay for leasing the famous Borovets villa, which everyone who served in Bulgaria subsequently has profited from.

Q: What was the Harriman connection, the money?

HOUSTON: Yes. Funding is something we would not have gotten otherwise, without the use of her political connections and Harriman's weight in getting that into the budget. There are other posts in the world perhaps more deserving of a recreation place than Sofia, but we got the money through Eugenie's good connections. The previous minister, Eddie Page, had tried but without success. I was Bulgaria during the Cuban missile crisis which started for real on October 22, 1962.

Q: I was in Budapest at the time, and I know that it was quite an experience for us, how was it for you?

HOUSTON: The local reaction was one of great fear and caution. Our DCM, Charlie Stephen, was out of the country at the time, so I was acting DCM. I don't think the Bulgarians ever believed they were going to be the number one target. But we came very close to nuclear war, and I am sure they realized how close it was. My wife, our youngest daughter, and I happened to be held at gunpoint for about twenty minutes during the height of the crisis. I had taken the wife and child out to show them what I thought was a quick and easy way to drive to Belgrade in case the need arose. We were in a part of Sofia I had never been in before. The place was not on the main road to Belgrade, and was not shaping up to what I thought it should be. I stopped along the road and pulled out a map to see where I was. Unbeknownst to me, the stretch of road where I had stopped was marked by two no stopping signs separated by a couple of kilometers. Unless you happen to see the beginning sign, you don't know the ban had started, and if you don't see the ending sign, you don't know the ban had stopped. Where we stopped happened to be along the road nearest to the main radar control site for the air defenses of Sofia. The Bulgarians were sure I was there with nefarious purposes in mind. They were out there holding us at gunpoint and interviewing me to see what my story was. I showed them my map and told them I was trying to get the road to Belgrade. They said, "No, you're not, you are out here in connection with your friends." I said, "No, I am out here only with my wife and daughter." The secret police were then trailing our military attachés on their way at that moment to observe the radar site, and there I was. Probably I went down as suspicious in the books of the secret police at that time. I was officially the head of the Embassy political section, but I was probably marked thereafter as somehow being connected with spying operations.

Q: This was right during the crisis?

HOUSTON: Right during the crisis.

Q: We had somewhat similar things in Budapest during those days.

HOUSTON: Our being in the area was completely innocent. I did not know where the main radar site was, I had not seen the no parking sign, and I was lost.

Q: Didn't they name the chief villain in their favorite spy movie after you later on?

HOUSTON: Later on, there was an incident when a spy, an undercover Bulgarian allegedly recruited by the CIA, was caught. The Bulgarian security service was trying to establish a link

between this spy whom they had and the legation. They captured the spy's radio transmitter and radio schedule. He was supposed to be heard by a listening post in Greece if he had any serious information to impart. The Bulgarians tried to use this radio communication link to set up a meeting with the spy on the main street in Sofia, to be attended by someone in the legation. Well as it came out later in some newspaper article, at the very hour of the assigned meeting and on the street corner where this fellow was waiting and was supposed to be picked up, I walked past him just as I did every evening on my way home. Several other people in the legation who lived east of the chancery went past that same corner too on that evening, it was the natural way to go. Again their suspicions must have been aroused, "What was this guy Houston up to?" The worst thing was that in press articles later, they did not describe me by name. They just said that a short time after one legation officer went by, smartly dressed, another legation staff member "in a cap and a crumpled raincoat" came walking by, trying to disguise himself. Well, my raincoat was crumpled and I did wear a cap, so I was sure they were talking about me. Later, in talking about this with John Anderson, the husband of Minister Anderson, he said, "You think that was you, I'm sure it was me." So it is a matter of dispute who the guy in the cap and the crumpled raincoat was whom Bulgarians thought was trying to meet the alleged spy that evening.

Q: Was John Anderson living there all the time?

HOUSTON: He was an artist who became a Foreign Service dependent and adjusted to this status quite well. The only other important incident in that first tour in Bulgaria was the Kennedy assassination, November 23, 1963. Eugenie Anderson wanted to have some sort of public commemoration. She was always very sensitive to the public relations aspect. She arranged with the local Catholic Church to have a memorial mass. She invited members of the Bulgarian government to come, and the chiefs of diplomatic missions. The Protocol Office sent some low-ranking officer, that was the only Bulgarian Government recognition of the Kennedy death. They were very much atheists, and if they would go to any church, it would not be a Catholic Church, but an Orthodox Church. The only Communist ambassador to show up at the mass was the Romanian. He was a good Communist and would not go inside the church door. He simply stood outside during the service and made sure that we knew that he had come. In retrospect, this was the first sign of Romanian deviation I can recall.

Q: That was when it was just beginning. You got the usual two-year treatment and then back to what looks like something that you were doing before.

HOUSTON: I came back from Sofia to the same organization I had left in 1961. It was now in the Bureau of European Affairs. We had offices in the main State Department building. Our DCM from Warsaw, Frank Siscoe, was now running it, and ran it for quite a few years. I guess my assignment indicates that the Department really did not know what to do with me. They certainly did not follow their rotational policy very well with me. I had two tours in the cultural exchanges business, just as I had two tours in Bulgaria and two with BEX. I don't think many people have such double tours in the Foreign Service now.

Q: How did you get along with learning three Slavic languages? Did you get them confused?

HOUSTON: It is very difficult to distinguish between them. I must admit that learning Bulgarian

was facilitated by knowing Polish. During that summer in 1948 that I spent in Colorado, I studied Russian. That may have helped my Polish later. Bulgarian is the easiest Slavic language, since the nouns and adjectives don't decline. I got my test score in Bulgarian, I was 4+. Whereas my Russian was only 3+ and Polish was 4 when I finished FSI.

Q: Do you have any extensive report on your European exchange job?

HOUSTON: I think the exchanges assignments laid the groundwork for my later appearance in Moscow as Counselor for Science and Technology. Normally you have to do an apprenticeship in Soviet Affairs before you can get a Counselor rank in Moscow. I think this is one factor that stood me in good stead when I finally did go to Moscow.

Q: Mr. Houston, we had just gotten you back to Washington for your second tour in the Department and you were starting to describe your job there.

HOUSTON: The job of Albanian and Bulgarian desk officer, which was just down the hall from the Exchanges office, was useful to me later on. When Woodie White left that desk officer job in the middle of 1966, I grabbed it. I was well qualified on the basis of my time in Bulgaria, of course. The job gave me time to learn a little more about Albania. I recalled my conversation with Ambassador Joe Jacobs in Warsaw, and with his secretary there, who had also been with him in Albania. Albania seemed like a quaint little country. Ultimately I hoped to be assigned there. Now that I am retired there are signs that U.S.-Albanian relations might be restored. Curtis Kamman is reported as having discussed this very subject with the Albanian representative recently at the UN. I can't say that much went on in Bulgaria or Albania when I was on the desk. I was called recently as a possible witness at an espionage trial in New York of a Bulgarian trade representative, because of conversations I had had with Bulgarian officials. I was never put on the stand. The U.S. and Bulgarians had agreed that the Bulgarians could have a commercial office in New York. The question arose as to whether persons assigned to that commercial office were entitled to full diplomatic immunity or not. I had conversations during my time on the desk with the DCM at the Bulgarian embassy on this very subject. But other than that, I can't think of anything I did that will go down in the history books. Certainly there was no movement to restore relations with Albania at that time, relations were completely frozen.

At the end of 1968, I was transferred briefly to Vancouver, Canada, ostensibly to replace the number two man there. Although I outranked him, he arranged with the Embassy in Ottawa to stay on, with me as his deputy. This was not satisfactory to me; my assignment was shortly thereafter broken.

I came back to Washington to work in something called the Substantive Information Systems Staff. This was the Department's commitment at the time to try to computerize its information handling, a very initial effort. We envisaged some very wild blue yonder types of projects. Our boss was particularly keen on having a system in which Department officers told the information managers the kinds of information they were interested in. Thereafter, the distribution of messages in the Department would be done by computer strictly according to those profiles. If you did not get a message, it was because you did not ask for it in your profile. As a Foreign Service Officer, I tried to add a little common sense and Foreign Service background to what the

wild blue yonder boys were dreaming. I was never enamored with computer distribution of messages as much as perfecting the retrieval process so that if you wanted a historical document, you could get it quickly rather than search around, perhaps in vain, to find it. I am afraid that all that came out of the effort was the introduction of the TAGS system, or putting codes on all telegrams, airgrams and so forth which came in, to aid in retrieving messages.

Q: It is hard to think at this time that the computer as such did not exist, at least in the substantive parts of the Department, there was certainly no Apples, Wangs.

HOUSTON: There was considerable resistance, I think, to the idea, and that is why, perhaps, the project I worked on, which had such wild blue yonder ideas of automatic distribution of messages according to user profiles, was never adopted. The Department managers were willing to go along with introducing the TAGS coding system. After all, the old-fashioned way was putting a file number on a message and putting it in a folder. TAGS coding really was not that much different.

Q: I actually served myself on some kind of committee at that time that met periodically and heard reports on the computer progress. We have come back to the great occasion when you and I got together to do something.

HOUSTON: This came about when Jack McSweeney, the first person to be elevated from minister to Bulgaria to ambassador to Bulgaria, was looking for a new DCM. Richard G. Johnson, who had been together with me, Richard E. Johnson and Valdemar N. Johnson in Warsaw, was leaving as McSweeney's DCM in Sofia. McSweeney, to whom I will always be grateful, remembered the assistance I, as desk officer, gave him when he was first going out as minister to Bulgaria. I was delighted. While I liked the computer job, I really did not feel it was vital, and so I jumped at this chance to go back to Bulgaria. Richard G. Johnson had to be back in the U.S. for graduation of a child at the beginning of June of 1970. In May 1970 I went out for an overlap with him. Between the time Jack McSweeney asked me to be his DCM and the time I got there, the Department had changed their plans for Jack. He now was not to stay on long after I arrived. The Department had Ambassador Horace G. Torbert in mind to go out to replace McSweeney, but Ambassador Torbert was busy tending the shop in Congressional Relations. It was not certain when he could be sprung. So just a few weeks after my arrival in Sofia, I became chargé. The chargéship lasted until Ambassador Torbert arrived in early October. This is the time when I most appreciated the idea of being thoroughly prepared before going to a post. Having served two years, 1962-64, as head of the political section in Sofia and then two years as Bulgarian desk officer, I had, perhaps for the first time, really adequate preparation for my Foreign Service job. Language and everything.

We did not have the problem of young children, this time, to educate. It was my first DCMship, we had better living conditions. My second tour to Bulgaria was the most delightful, I think in retrospect, of all my Foreign Service assignments. And particularly so because Ambassador Torbert, when he arrived, proved to be a very fine boss.

Q: [Laughter.] What kind of problems did you have? Communist countries have a tendency to test people out fairly early when they think they may be vulnerable. Did you have any problems?

HOUSTON: No. The whole time in Bulgaria was a very pleasant one. As I recall, you arrived after the Plovdiv fair. I thus had to escort personally the Communist Party boss, Todor Zhivkov, through the Plovdiv fair and explain things to him. Things went well there. We had a few minor problems, but nothing like the test of fire Eugenie Anderson was given on her first year of the Plovdiv fair. Then the Bulgarians seized our fair brochure and were not going to allow us to distribute it. She stood them down. Generally U.S.-Bulgarian relations at the time were on the upswing, not very far up, but the direction was right. A man now important in Bulgarian affairs, Prime Minister Andrey Lukanov, appeared as a vice minister of foreign trade in those days, the first real new-thinking man in the Bulgarian leadership.

We had the beautiful dacha in the mountains to repair to. I just remember this period as a very pleasant time. No Cuban missile crisis, no presidents assassinated. True, we were frustrated in our long-standing wish to get out of the chancery that we had in Sofia. The chancery was surrounded on all sides, except the street side, by Bulgarian buildings, a security officer's nightmare. It was also a fire trap. We made absolutely no progress on that front. I just don't recall any particular problems, it all goes down as a rosy glow in my memory.

Q: Well, you did a lot of good work there and one of the things you did towards the end was to negotiate, finally, a consular agreement. Do you want to talk about the history of that? It did not revolutionize things, but it was the only agreement that was signed over many years.

HOUSTON: Well, to say that we negotiated the consular agreement is an exaggeration. A lawyer came out, an expert from LT (Treaty and Legal Division, Office of the Legal Division), who really did the negotiating. The agreement had been under negotiation for a long time. Bulgaria fell in line on a consular convention after other countries, including the Soviet Union, had negotiated an agreement. The Bulgarian agreement did provide, at least on paper, assurance that we would be promptly notified if American citizens got into trouble. We had another agreement not so formal perhaps, to cooperate with the Bulgarians in combating narcotics. Much of what was done under the agreement is classified, but we did always consider the narcotics agreement a mark of how U.S.-Bulgarian relations were improving. Later on, the assassination attempt against the Pope occurred, and there were all sorts of charges of Bulgarian government agents cooperating with Turkish drug smugglers, setting up Mohamad Agca, who was responsible for the assassination attempt, etc. I could not help but think then that maybe the cooperation between the United States and Bulgaria was really designed, in Bulgarian eyes, to give Bulgarian security authorities a better view of how much we knew about drug smuggling in and through Bulgaria. Then they could devise better ways to smuggle drugs through Bulgaria without our knowing it. But this is the way one becomes after years of service in Eastern Europe, I suppose, suspicious of everything.

One curious thing that came out when it was time for me to leave Bulgaria. Ambassador Torbert had decided he wanted to retire, I believe, in January 1973. I know you had some problems convincing the Department that it was your wish to retire. You had to send in two letters of resignation before they would believe it. In any case, the Department was not ready to name a new envoy when Ambassador Torbert retired. Perhaps there was some struggle going on. Kissinger may have been struggling with various career people as to who would take over the

embassy in Sofia. I was left as chargé. It was clear that since I had completed over three years there by May of 1973, I could not be left there. As they did not have a new ambassador ready to be named, they simply named a new chargé. The new chargé was Helene Batjer, an old Eastern European hand, who was now, perhaps belatedly, being recognized as the valuable officer that she was. But instead of having her designated as chargé from Washington, as legally should have been done, she was sent out with no special accreditation. I was ordered to turn the embassy over to her two weeks after she arrived, and then leave. So it fell to me as chargé to inform the Bulgarian government that I was leaving the embassy in the hands of Helene Batjer as chargé. I think the Vienna Convention prevents that sort of thing. In any case, the Bulgarians challenged this. I think Bulgarian *amour propre* was offended by the idea that we were leaving the important Sofia mission without an ambassador for an extended period of time. Helene Batjer, I am told, ultimately had to be designated as chargé from Washington. Finally a new ambassador, Martin Herz, was sent out. This is a technical point, and I must admit that I have not done a lot of research on it. I do know that Helene Batjer's credentials were challenged because they came from me rather than from Washington.

Q: One of the fascinating things that happened at that time was the death of the Foreign Minister and the emergence of a new Foreign Minister who became quite famous. I know that you made quite a study of it and I wonder if you could tell about what we knew about it?

HOUSTON: I am not sure that anyone outside Bulgaria knows the truth. Bulgaria had a very popular Foreign Minister, Ivan Bashev, at the time. A relatively young man, and relatively more flexible than many in the Communist government at the time. He was an athletic skier. Periodically he would go skiing on Mount Vitosha. One time he disappeared in a snow storm not very far from a ski lodge up there. The story put out was that he had gotten confused in this snow storm and froze to death up on the mountain. He was buried as a hero. Unofficially, it was rumored that he was a man in trouble with the hardliners, and that he may have been so driven into a corner by these hardliners. The rumor was that he took his own life. That is theory number one. Theory number two, which is far less accepted, is that he was done away with because he had become inconvenient to the party boss. Zhivkov was overthrown in December '89, one of the last East European hardliners to go. Subsequently, he has been accused of all sorts of nefarious deeds. Bashev's replacement was Peter Mladenov. Far from being a trim and athletic figure like Bashev, Mladenov was a rotund man who became even more rotund. In his role of Foreign Minister, he had to play the role of a liberal, or quasi-liberal. He is now acting as a reform Communist, hoping that the Bulgarian Communist Party in its new reform image will continue to play an important role, although no longer a constitutionally guaranteed leading role, in Bulgaria. The forthcoming elections will tell if he has been successful in that regard. But cause of the death of Ivan Bashev under mysterious circumstances in the storm on Mt. Vitosha, as far as I know, is still unknown.

When I left Bulgaria in September of 1973, I was told by Walt Stoessel that the Department had something good in mind for me. They could not tell me just yet what it would be, but in the meantime I would be assigned as an European expert with the U.S. delegation to the Twenty-Eighth General Assembly meeting later in September in New York. I never really thought highly of multi-lateral diplomacy, having been brought up in bilateral diplomacy. I did profit, educationally, from having this exposure to multi-lateral diplomacy as practiced at the UN. My

principal work assignment there was to lobby European countries, usually the European neutrals, to support U.S. positions. And also to report what they had to say. One of the more unusual things that I remember doing was going out to Washington Heights to escort Henry Kissinger's parents to the General Assembly session in which he made his first appearance as Secretary of State. They were delightful people, and I was happy to do it. I was also seated, at one time, in one of the U.S. seats on the floor behind Henry Kissinger when the two German states were admitted as UN members. The two Germanys had been blocked because the East did not want to recognize West Germany and the West did not want to accept East Germany. But by 1973, an agreement had been worked out that the two Germanys would be admitted as sovereign states. I was behind Henry Kissinger when Willy Brandt got up to deliver the speech for West Germany. Henry Kissinger put on earphones so he could listen to him in English; I was proud that I could listen to him in German without the earphones.

Another interesting moment from that session: The U.S. and Soviet UN delegations and permanent reps had a tradition that they would meet before a new session got underway, to talk to each other and warn each other about anything they were planning to bring up. The idea that we were trying to catch each other by surprise had gone by the boards. As an European expert, I was present when Jacob Malik came in to meet John Scali, who was the U.S. permanent representative. This was an interesting session. By no means did they tell us all that they eventually brought up in the session, but the Soviets went through the motions, at least, of big power committee.

RICHARD E. JOHNSON
Deputy Chief of Mission
Sofia (1963-1965)

Richard E. Johnson was born and raised in Winnetka, Illinois. He attended Harvard University, graduated in 1942, and joined the Navy. He came to work for the State Department in 1947 as a civil servant until 1951. He later joined the Foreign Service and served in Hong Kong, Canada, Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Brazil, and Yugoslavia and Brazil again as Deputy Chief of Mission. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on January 30, 1991.

Q: Well, then you moved to Sofia as deputy chief of mission, and you were there from '63 to '65. How did that come about? You weren't in Yugoslavia very long.

JOHNSON: No, that was the result of Eugenie Anderson's selection. She came through Belgrade, and she and I worked together on something. We had a legation in Sofia then, you know, it was one of our last legations, and Eugenie was the minister to Bulgaria. She was then looking for a new DCM because Charlie Stefan was finishing his tour. So she asked me if I'd like to take the job, and I jumped at the chance.

Eugenie had a great public relations orientation; she liked to shake hands and to get out and around. Of course, Bulgaria is a very difficult place to do that, but Eugenie nonetheless tried. She

dressed very beautifully, both in terms of her personality and intelligence but also her appearance; she spoke well for the USA as obviously a prosperous woman. She and her USIA guy, a guy named Alex Bloomfield, would pile into her Cadillac and just shoot off for a day visiting different people, not with prearranged appointments necessarily, but going into the marketplace, and the mobs would descend around this huge Cadillac and Eugenie would shake hands and, through Alex Bloomfield who spoke excellent Bulgarian, she would tell everybody how the U.S. only wanted friendship with Bulgaria and that we hoped there would be some exchanges eventually, but the Bulgarian government wasn't doing much on that. And she'd do that until the secret police would sort of muscle her along. She liked to do that, and she left the business of dealing with the government to me, so I was the one that went around and delivered demarches at government ministries.

And at that time, the U.S. desk officer in the Bulgarian government (I guess he handled other countries in addition to the U.S.) didn't speak English, so the whole thing had to be conducted in Bulgarian. My Bulgarian was not very good. They decided that I could convert from the Polish and the Serbo-Croatian that I knew to Bulgarian without going through FSI, so it was rather rocky. I remember coming back, and Eugenie would say, "Well, what did he say?"

And I'd say, well, he said thus and so and so and so.

And Eugenie would say, "My gosh, are you sure he did?"

And I'd say, "(um, er) Yes, I'm sure."

And she'd say, "Well then, put it in a telegram, the department has got to know about this!"

I thought at that time I was a pretty weak reed to lean on.

That tour was generally, I would say, relative to some of my other tours, dull, because contacts with the Bulgarian population were all but impossible. We came to know a few doctors because there were international medical conferences in town. But one doctor that we came to know and had to our house for dinner was subsequently tried as a spy and strung up. There was just damn little contact, even with government people or press people. They just weren't interested.

Q: And the United States per se had very little interest in Bulgaria.

JOHNSON: I wouldn't say that, Stu, I think we wanted to warm-up relations. In those days, we were trying to build bridges, you remember. I remember, as DCM, urging that we arrange what we called basket talks with the Bulgarians, on a variety of subjects, to try to improve relations - talk about a consular agreement, and talk about beefing up exchanges. We tried on a number occasions to get the Bulgarian government interested in accepting some nice exchange offers. I remember one was with the Columbia Medical School, an internship. Absolutely no political connotation at all. But the Bulgarian reaction was, "Well, why are you offering us this?"

And we'd say, "Well, just to develop relations."

And the official would look at you sort of as if to say that's a likely story! And they'd turn it down.

So I think we tried.

One of the maddening things the Bulgarians would do was when an American delegation came, let's say, for some kind of an international medical conference, they would invite our doctors to a briefing and they would say, "You know, it's really unfortunate that our relations are so poor. It's the result of your legation here, they just don't seem interested in doing anything. We've proposed a number of initiatives." And the doctors often would believe that. They'd come around and say, "Why don't you guys try? Get off the dime." And maybe I had just come back from my third effort to interest somebody in taking this Columbia internship. The Bulgarians really had tremendous fear of the USA. They were not interested in us at all.

On two or maybe three occasions, the embassy was under siege by mobs of Communists. We were involved in Vietnam at the time. The occasion was usually some alleged U.S. atrocity in Southeast Asia, like bombing Cambodia or something.

These were quite frightening occasions, particularly for me, because I was the chargé d'affaires at the time of at least two of them. Eugenie was out in Western Europe at those times. They were frightening because I was worried that these mobs would set fire to the post. They always broke windows and started climbing into the windows. And we had the whole embassy staff to protect. We would be up on the top floor. The locals would have been sent home, but most of the embassy staff was there, because many of us lived there, and they were sort of cowering in a corner while rocks rained through the windows into the offices of the embassy. And, as soon as I could, I would have to try to get out the front door of the embassy, pushing against this surging crowd, and make my way through the crowd, with all sorts of taunts and insults and being spat upon, to the Foreign Ministry, which was just across the way.

And I would see a man named Bashev, who was the foreign minister, a really sinister, silent man who had very little to say. And the pretext for these things was always the same. Of course, the government always claimed: We had nothing to do with it, it's just an outburst of sentiment on behalf of our youth. But they would then say, "But, Mr. Johnson, a tip for you would be to close down that window you have where you display photographs that are sent to you from Washington, photographs that are propaganda. We know they aren't true, and it infuriates our people. Will you please close it down?"

And my answer was always the same, "This is our building and that's our window and we aren't going to close it down. And if you're going to make it impossible for us to operate, then we'll have to close this post." Nobody ever really thought of doing that, but I had to reply in fairly tough terms with them.

This happened two or three times while I was there. On one occasion, all the cars in front of the embassy were turned over and bashed. I got them to pay for the repairs to mine eventually.

Q: Was this the Bulgarian Communists acting as a Bulgarian Communist regime rather than at

the instigation of the Soviets? They might have been marching in step, but was this coming from them, or did you feel they were looking over their shoulder?

JOHNSON: I had the feeling maybe they were doing what they thought the Soviets would want them to do, but I don't think Moscow actually asked them to besiege the U.S. embassy. In fact, I think eventually Moscow developed some concerns that this sort of thing could get out of hand. And, you remember, it was turned off, just suddenly, and there weren't any more. No, I think the Bulgarians felt that this was a kind of a show of their loyalty, of their support for Moscow's position.

And so, if I woke up in the morning and heard BBC describing some brand new extension of the war in Southeast Asia, I'd have to tell our security officer, and splice the main brace, and get ready.

Q: Well, you left Sofia in 1965 and came back, and I have you going to United Nations Affairs for about four years. That must have been a fascinating period.

JOHNSON: It was fun. I liked it.

DONALD C. TICE
Political/Economic Officer
Sofia (1964-1967)

Born in Kansas in 1932, Donald C. Tice received his BS from the University of Kansas and served in the U.S. Air Force from 1954 to 1956 as a second lieutenant. His foreign assignments included Antwerp, Montreal, Sofia and Belgrade. He was interviewed on February 10, 1997 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: Don, when you left Montreal, you went to study Bulgarian. When you asked for Eastern European or Soviet language training, did you expect to be sent to study Bulgarian? After all, Bulgaria is not only down South physically and geographically but kind of "at the end of the line."

TICE: Having applied for Eastern European language training, when I hung up the telephone after learning of my assignment to Bulgarian language training, the first thing I did was to hunt up an atlas to see where Bulgaria was! [Laughter] I guess that I had been thinking of Prague, Warsaw, or places like that. Anyhow, both my wife and I did 10 months of Bulgarian language training.

Q: Tell me. You studied Bulgarian. I studied Serbo-Croatian at almost the same time, in 1961-1962.

TICE: You must have had Father Milosevic [an Orthodox priest working as a language instructor] as one of your teachers.

Q: I was wondering whether you got much from your teachers. Actually, my teachers were Jankovic and Popovic. Larry Eagleburger [later Ambassador to Yugoslavia and Secretary of State] was also in the class. If we got nothing else out of that class, it was a feeling for the Serb mind and mentality. How did you feel about it? Did you get something about the Bulgarian outlook on the world?

TICE: Oh, yes. We had only one teacher because studying Bulgarian involved a really "small country syndrome." Our teacher was a lady named Vera Graff. She was a very bright, bubbly little lady. She was pleasant, well read, and knew Bulgarian literature and that kind of thing. We got a feel from her for things Bulgarian and Bulgarian ways of looking at things.

There were only four of us in the class, one of whom was my wife. That was my first wife, by the way. She died in 1989. She stuck out the whole 10 months with me. The other students in the class included a USIA [United States Information Agency] officer named Timothy Pfeiffer and another young Foreign Service Officer named Bob Smith.

When we got to Bulgaria, members of our Bulgarian class at the FSI [Foreign Service Institute] made up about three-fifths of the staff of the Embassy in Sofia. Actually, it was not an Embassy; it was a Legation, one of the last in the Foreign Service. Anyhow, in the Legation Bob Smith was Political Officer, I was Economic Officer, and Tim Pfeiffer was Public Affairs Officer. I still have my Third Secretary of Legation identity card. The U. S. Mission in Sofia was the last Legation we had. It was sort of a point of pride that I served in the last U. S. Legation. In fact, I don't think the U.S. has Third Secretaries any more.

Q: So you were in Sofia, Bulgaria, from...

TICE: We got there in the summer of 1964 and left in the summer of 1967. We took home leave after 18 months in Sofia.

Q: What was the state of our relations with Bulgaria when you went there in 1964, both in terms of what you learned in whatever area studies you had and what you learned when you got there?

TICE: U. S. relations with Bulgaria were formal and cold. At that time Bulgaria was used by the Soviets as a kind of "trial balloon" agent. The Soviet Ambassador in Sofia was referred to jokingly in the Diplomatic Corps as the "Pro-Consul." He was the "big man" in Sofia. Todor Zhivkov and all of his lackeys obviously looked to the Kremlin to learn what they should do. So dealing with the Bulgarians was cold and formal.

The Bulgarian Minister of the Interior had been very well trained by the KGB [Soviet secret police]. Ministry of the Interior agents were omnipresent. Our houses and apartments, and most of us lived in apartments, were "bugged" to a fare-thee-well. We had to assume that everything in the Legation was bugged.

Our Mission was and still is located in a little, store-front building in downtown Sofia. Living and working there was tough. Supplies were hard to get. You couldn't travel outside of Sofia

without obtaining prior permission for the trip. You had to give notice if you were going outside the city limits. Food, even in the government run, Diplomatic Store, was not particularly what you wanted. The variety of food was very limited.

Q: Did you have turnip salad?

TICE: Yes, yogurt was big, turnips were big. Potatoes and onions generally were unavailable near the end of the winter, and you really never saw green vegetables, even in the summer, when they were producing loads of it in Bulgaria. Much of their best produce, and meat, went to the Soviet Union. Green vegetables and fruit also were being exported to the West for hard currency. They came on the market in Bulgaria just enough ahead of the produce of the Po Valley [in Italy] that the Bulgarians could sell them handily, send them out to Western European markets out in big 18-wheelers marked "Bulgarplod," which means "Bulgarian fruit". The best vegetables and fruits were always shipped to Moscow, the rest went to Western Europe, and the Bulgarian public could buy them only at peak production periods when the volume of the crops exceeded their ability to ship them out.

Q: Who was the Minister while you were there?

TICE: Eugenie Anderson was. She was the first woman to be appointed a Chief of Mission in a communist country. She was appointed by President John Kennedy. She left Bulgaria in the spring of 1965, about six to eight months after I got there.

The next Minister was Nathaniel Davis, a career Foreign Service Officer who had just come out of an assignment to the White House staff. Nat was in Sofia only a year because he had a very unfortunate accident. He and his two small daughters had gone out on a cold, winter, Sunday afternoon, to a hill in Sofia which kids used to slide down. When his kids got cold he headed back for his residence with them in his van. As he was going down a steep hill with an ice slick on it, the van went out of control, went through an intersection, and smashed into a bus stop. One person was killed, and a second, a child, was badly injured.

The Bulgarians, of course, in their "kindly" way, saw this as an opportunity to "extort" the Americans. So the Department pulled Nat out real fast. His DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], Tom Tuck, was an "experiment," a USIA officer serving as a DCM. This was back when USIA officers were considered by the Department not as qualified as "real" FSOs. Tom Tuck of course was and is a highly accomplished diplomat, and went on to be one of the eminent "gray beards" of USIA.

We were very lucky when we lost Nat Davis that we had Tom Tuck as Chargé d'Affaires, because it was nearly a year before a successor to Nat was named.

Q: He was a Soviet hand at that time, wasn't he?

TICE: Yes, he had had experience in both the Soviet Union and in Germany. About the time Tom Tuck was leaving, we finally had an Ambassador accredited to Bulgaria, John [Jack] McSweeney. Jack was initially assigned to Bulgaria as Minister, but he had been lobbying to

have the position raised to the level of Ambassador, and the Department accepted his recommendation. I think that he had been Political Counselor and then DCM in the Embassy in Moscow. He was assigned as DCM in Belgium at the time he was appointed Minister in Bulgaria. Then the Department raised the office to the level of an Embassy. This had already been done in Hungary, which had the only other American Legation in the world.

That was one of the first times that I really got in a "swivet" with my Ambassador, although this was certainly not the last time.. When Minister McSweeney arrived in Sofia, he got us all together and said that he wanted to have all of our opinions on whether or not the Legation should be made an Embassy. When he came to me, I gave him rather a long and stern lecture on all of the concessions that we should get from the Bulgarians, because they considered it very important to have an American Embassy in Sofia at that point. I listed all of the things which, in my view, we should first demand before our Mission in Sofia was raised to be an Embassy.

I realized that I was in trouble because Jack McSweeney is a big, florid Irishman. The color on his face began to get redder and redder. He let me say my piece, and when I finished, he rasped out a "Thank you very much," and adjourned the meeting. Then they announced a week later that the Department was raising the Legation in Sofia to Embassy status. He had already known that.

Q: He wanted to be an Ambassador, that's all. You have to take that into consideration.

TICE: Yes, he wanted to be an Ambassador. McSweeney and I laughed about this incident later, once we got to know each other better.

Q: How was Eugenie Anderson as Minister?

TICE: She was quite good. She was very professional and very solicitous of the Legation staff. She honestly wanted to try to take care of us. She lived in a rather grand house (by comparison to most of our apartments), but at the same comfort level as the rest of us in terms of the difficulty of getting supplies. She had official functions there, and members of the staff were invited over to her residence or were invited to dinner, for example, more or less as "family" members. So we got to see some "civilization" that way.

She was very "political." She had always been, and that was why she was appointed.

Q: Hadn't she been Chairman or something like that of the Democratic National Committee?

TICE: I think that she had been. I liked her. She was a very interesting person. Her husband, John Anderson, had a family connection with the Kellogg breakfast cereal company and was quite a wealthy person. This was how she had had the money to get into the Hubert Humphrey [former Senator from Minnesota and Vice President of the United States] circle and climb up in the Democratic Party. Anderson lived in Sofia most of the time. He was a photographer. That was his hobby and his avocation. He was a very pleasant man, always sort of in the background.

At one point there were several, anti-American riots in Sofia, and he went out to take pictures of them. These took place near the Legation. Eugenie was absolutely furious with him for putting

himself in what was potentially "harm's way." I felt very uncomfortable being present when at the residence she was really "dressing him down" for having taken those pictures. This was the Ambassador talking to him. [Laughter].

Q: During the time that you were in Bulgaria, how did you report on the economy?

TICE: I dealt with this in two ways. One way was to read the newspapers. We read all seven newspapers published every day. I can still rattle off their names. We read "Politika" first. This was the Communist Party newspaper. What we read there was repeated in all of the other newspapers. "Politika" material accounted for about three-fourths of the contents of the other newspapers, although the other papers also carried other material. There were papers for agricultural, youth, labor, sports, arts, and the so-called Fatherland Front, which was the organization designed to involve the general populace who were not members of the communist party in social and political activities..

I used the material in the press as the basis for my reporting. Generally, we couldn't get appointments with officials in the economic ministries. They just wouldn't talk to you. So I collected information by word of mouth, on the cocktail circuit. There weren't very many Bulgarians at any of the social functions we attended. I talked to everybody I could and, of course, got a lot of "disinformation," bad information, and that kind of thing in the process.

My wife and I found ourselves in an interesting situation because we both were fluent in Bulgarian and spoke fairly fluent French. We were invited to a lot of functions that other diplomats, primarily accredited Ambassadors, were giving because by and large these diplomats didn't speak Bulgarian. If they invited Bulgarians, they would invite us because they would use us as language bridges, speaking three languages [English, French, and Bulgarian]. This got us into a lot of things that we wouldn't have been into otherwise. Most of the dinners hosted by Ambassadors were black tie. I attended more black tie functions in Sofia than did in the rest of my career put together. The "downside" of this was that we had something going on almost every night. You've been at small posts like that. It can be pretty deadly.

In fact, about the time that we got there, the Diplomatic Corps in Sofia made an agreement that there would be no official functions on Friday evenings, Saturdays, or Sundays, unless there were a visiting dignitary, a national holiday, or something like that involved or there was a date that couldn't be avoided. However, in general and even so, people would avoid ordinary, "social entertaining" on Friday evening, Saturday, or Sunday. That was a godsend, because we had three nights "off" the social round.

The best information could not be collected in Sofia. You got it outside of Sofia, but you had to have a travel permit to leave Sofia. We traveled to some extent on the basis of consular work. A lot of Bulgarians had emigrated to the United States during the period between World War I and World War II. Many of these people had retired, were elderly, and wanted to spend their final years in their land or origin.. During both world wars, and particularly World War I, there had been a lot of Bulgarians who had gone to the U. S. in the immigration wave in the early part of the 20th century and had served in the U. S. Army and were still alive when I was in Bulgaria. They had veterans' pensions, social security rights, and that kind of thing.

There was a Treasury embargo on U.S. dollars going into Bulgaria, with a few exceptions. Some of those exceptions concerned pensions for elderly people. These recipients couldn't get these pensions, however, unless a Consular Officer went out and certified the "bona fides" of the person who was the claimant, and could give some kind of assurance that the recipient would actually have the benefit of the money received.. That practice got us into all sorts of places and all sorts of mischief. I spent as much time as I could traveling around Bulgaria and confirming eligibility for pension checks. I generally traveled with a Consular Officer. If the Consular Officer was not be able to go, I would go in his stead since I was experienced in consular work. We had such a small staff at the Legation that more than two people from the core substantive staff (economic, political, consular) couldn't travel at one time. The language officer at the British Embassy was fluent in Bulgarian, and he frequently accompanied me and perhaps one other Legation officer on week-long trips to visit places which we had arranged to visit.

We had to file our travel plans in advance with the Bulgarian authorities, and it often took some while to receive approval of the itinerary. Once we got outside of Sofia, it was a different world. I was talking one night to a drunken young worker in a bar in a Danube River Valley town. I said to him: "Aren't you afraid to be seen with us? You just pointed out to me that those guys over at the next table are from the Secret Police." He replied: "Well, about the worst thing that they can do to you here is exile you from Sofia, and I don't live in Sofia anyway." [Laughter] We traveled and pretty well covered everything but the specifically "denied" areas in that country, during one trip or another. We would go into our hotel, go down to the front desk, and then ask the equivalent of: "Where's the action?" They would always just tell us, right out, where the cafes, restaurants, and other places were which students and young workers patronized and where they got drunk every night. That was the way they lived, like the Russians.

When we would go to one of these places, we'd always have our "security tail" with us. However, these security people were all local residents, and the people just weren't afraid of them, as they would have been if the security people, "the heavies," had come from Sofia. We would set ourselves up at a table, order some wine, and make conversation. We would end up feeding and providing drinks to a whole bunch of youngsters. They were surprisingly well informed on what was going on in terms of the internal politics of Bulgaria, and they'd tell you about it.

One of the oddest experiences I had in that regard was in a town called Vidin [northwestern Bulgaria], on the Danube River.. On this particular trip we had to look up birth records in a church. When we got to Vidin, we found the church and church offices locked, and an inquiry were told that the Orthodox priest had been "exiled" from the church for a long time, and could be found in the provincial capital of Tirnovo. We sought him out, and he obtained permission to go with us because we were going to verify a birth record, and, therefore, money would come into the country later on. When we got into the car with him, he said: "Have you heard about the attempted coup d'etat?" We said: "What are you talking about?" He said: "This happened in Sofia. The Todorov Gorunya faction tried to throw Zhivkov out of power." He added: "One man was killed when he jumped off the top of a building, in downtown Sofia." I quickly got on the telephone and called the Embassy. This was just becoming known in Sofia, when I telephoned. The "word" travels quickly in a country like that.

That was an experience, too, because I think that the church we visited with the priest was built in the 12th century, part of it underground. There was a beautiful "ikonostasis" [a grouping of ikons on a screen which separates the altar area from the rest of the church] but some of the ikons were missing. The priest said: "Oh, they've been in here again. If you boys want any ikons, why don't you take them because the communists are just going to take all of the rest of them away." I thanked him but I said: "Father, but I couldn't and wouldn't do that to your church. Also, that would get me thrown out of this country in a flash." [Laughter] He laughed. I thought it over, and decided that we didn't know whether he was working for the communists. He had obviously been "briefed" before talking to us. You had to assume that anybody you talked to might be working for the communists. This partly underground church was really eerie, going back so far into history. We had a lot of experiences like that.

We had another experience in Varna, a beach resort town [on the Black Sea]. At that time the Bulgarians were offering very low cost tours to Varna. They were ready to do anything to get "hard currency." The main customers at the time were Germans and Scandinavians staying at these lovely looking hotels, with a view over these beautiful beaches. However, nothing worked at the hotels. Anyway, our Defense Attaché had come down to Varna separately and brought his wife and the wife of one of the guys I was traveling with. We decided that we would all go out to dinner together. We had two cars, both of them big, black Ford station wagons which were about twice as big as anything but the "Chaikas" [Soviet built automobiles used for high-level officials] you normally saw there. When the Defense Attaché pulled away from the hotel, he entered a traffic circle, which was in the center of Varna. As he started around that circle his "tail" car filled in behind him, I fell in behind that, and my "tail" car filled in behind me. The Defense Attaché saw what was happening. He rolled down his window and let out a "Texas Yell." We just kept driving around and around the circle. There were four "goons" [secret police] in each of the "tail" cars. We were all laughing like hell. The people on the sidewalks were standing and applauding as we went around and around. We could have gotten into trouble with that kind of silliness.

Q: Sometimes it just "bubbles" out. I take it that local security operations were not as sophisticated as in the Soviet Union. When you went out in the evening in the Soviet Union, you really had to be worried about being "compromised," and so forth.

TICE: It was that way. We had a firm rule that we never traveled alone, for example. I was involved in two incidents. In one case two other guys from the Embassy and I were up on the Danube River, near the "Iron Gates," the Zhelesny Vrati, a big, hydroelectric project which involved Hungary, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Bulgaria. . We checked into our hotel and then went to an outdoor restaurant right on the banks of the Danube River. We "collected" our usual crew of young people who joined our table. Midway in the evening a guy joined us who insisted on buying the wine for the table. We weren't paying much attention and didn't look to see whether the wine came corked or not. It probably wouldn't have made any difference. Anyway, it had been drugged. Fortunately, in this case at least, I have a very "sensitive" stomach. I began to feel "queasy" and said to my two companions: "They put something in the wine. Let's get up and get out of here." We paid up and started back to the hotel, which was a couple of hundred yards away. I went over to the seawall along the Danube River and threw up. It hadn't hit the other

guys yet. We got down to the hotel, and then it got to the other two. Because I had gotten rid of whatever it was early enough, I never passed out. The other two did. We were vomiting and suffering from diarrhea. It was obvious that, whatever they gave us, they did not want us to continue doing what we were doing. By about 3:00 a.m. we were over the worst effects of the drug and decided to "fix their wagon." We quietly packed up our stuff, went downstairs, out the front door, and took off, which left our "tail" cars trying their damndest to catch up with us. They were driving Soviet-made "Volgas," which are not good cars to drive over rough roads. We took a non-surfaced road from the Iron Gates to the "Friendship Bridge" at Ruse, downriver on the Bulgarian [southern] side of the Danube River. We "fed them dirt" all the way on these non-surfaced roads. That kind of thing could also have gotten us into trouble. We probably should have behaved a little better, but you get "bored" under all of this pressure. [Laughter]

Q: That's interesting. Exactly at the same time, I was in Yugoslavia, just across the border and in another communist country. I was there from 1962 to 1967. One of my great joys was taking off, by myself, to deliver Social Security checks. I did this again and again. By contrast with your experience, I didn't have any trouble at all. The Yugoslavs just weren't playing that "game."

TICE: American aid to Yugoslavia was flooding in at that time, and they weren't going to do anything to halt it.

Q: I always checked with the local police. If I were traveling, for example, up in the hills of Bosnia, I would always go to a police station and say: "I'm the American Consul. I'm looking for such and such," so they knew exactly what I was doing and they could report back in to their superiors. I made quite sure that I wasn't surprising them.

TICE: It was a very different atmosphere. I was there in Yugoslavia from 1972 to 1975. However, the Bulgarians officials were mean and nasty. There were all sorts of sexual compromise attempts on us. As a matter of fact, occasionally I would be warned to be particularly careful about what I was doing and where I was, and to have somebody with me all the time for a while. I would say: "What's this about?" The person warning me would say: "I can't tell you in detail, but just be alert."

The only other, nasty incident while I was in Bulgaria was at a trade fair in 1964. We had a U.S. pavilion there.

Q: Was this at Plovdiv?

TICE: Yes, the Plovdiv trade fair. We used to joke that we could have put the American flag over the front end of the pavilion and put one of our USIA [United States Information Agency] employees, who was originally Russian, outside to greet the people, and we would have gotten the biggest crowd at the fair, just by being there. The Bulgarian people were very quiescent and subdued, politically. However, they loved America. They would turn out for anything American.

The incident I mentioned happened one evening when I had to go back to my hotel to get something. It was toward evening closing time, and when I came back in through the main gate, a couple of the "goons" jumped me. I didn't fight back. I just "took the fall" [i.e., let them beat me

up]. They whacked me a few times and then ran off. I went into the pavilion and told Minister Anderson, who happened to be visiting at the time, what had happened. She immediately began to raise all sorts of hell with the authorities.

They were evidently looking for some American to precipitate an incident. Following along behind me was a Serbian-American named Nick Lalic. He was with the U. S. Department of Commerce trade fair organization. When Nick came through the gate, the "goons" jumped him. Nick was about 6'4" and weighed about 280 pounds, or something like that. He just turned around and splattered one of the "goons" against a wall and slugged the other one. Then they put the regular cops on him and arrested him on a charge of precipitating an "incident." They had apparently hoped to try that with me. I hadn't been there very long and would have been a good "catch" because I was a language officer. They could have PNGed [declaring him "Persona Non Grata"] me early on in my tour. We had to get Nick out of the country fast.

The Bulgarians did that kind of thing. You just had to be careful. The listening "bugs" in our apartment were obvious. On occasion, when it was quiet in the apartment, the surveillance folks would turn up the gain on their microphones so that they would be sure of not missing anything. When they did this, our French poodle would bark and point at the nearest listening device. We knew from this where they were -- under the living room couch, under the dining room table, in the den by the telephone, and under the bed in the master bedroom. [Laughter]

Q: How were your relations with the Bulgarian ministries? Did you go to the ministries?

TICE: Only rarely. You would have to request an appointment, and it might take a week for them to agree to the meeting, if they agreed at all. Except for Minister Anderson. She could generally get an appointment whenever she wanted one. By and large, in the case of more junior people in our Embassy, the Bulgarians just didn't want the top level of their ministries to be dealing with Westerners. So it was very difficult to arrange an appointment.

The only contact I had, which I was able to maintain over a period of time, was with Academician Dashkelov, who was the head of the Bulgarian Academy of Agricultural Sciences. I got to know him because I had asked for an appointment to call on him about something or other. He apparently took a liking to me and felt that he was pretty well insulated from communist "retaliation" for anything, because he was a very eminent man. He was known as the "tomato professor" because he had developed a strain of tomatoes which both tasted good and were hearty enough to be transported over long distances.

We had no agricultural attaché at the Legation, so I filled that function, and any time I could find an excuse I called Academician Dashkelov at the Bulgarian Academy. This relationship took a sad turn, however, when we had a visiting agricultural attaché who was posted to Moscow. I was able to organize a buffet dinner at my apartment, and I invited Dashkelov, the Academy's Chief of Protocol (with whom arranged the event) and a couple of other Bulgarian officials. It was the only time that I had Bulgarian officials in my apartment during the three years that I was in Bulgaria. They just wouldn't accept my invitations. The sad turn of events involved the Chief of Protocol, a lovely man and an opera buff. I had a new German "Grundig" stereo set and a recent record of Boris Kristoff, a renowned Bulgarian basso, singing excerpts from the great Russian

operas. The Chief of Protocol sat with tears running down his face he was so moved by the beauty of the singing and so proud that it was a Bulgarian singing it. When he left at the end of the evening he thanked me profusely giving him the opportunity to hear the beautiful record. I never saw him again after that party. He just disappeared. He was no longer Chief of Protocol. I've always felt very sad about that because I'm very sure that his involvement in getting a bunch of people from the Bulgarian Academy to attend this reception at my house was responsible for whatever happened to him.

Q: Well, as Economic/Agricultural Officer did you ever get involved in "attar of roses" in Bulgaria?

TICE: Oh, yes. High-level visitors always wanted to visit the "Rose Valley." The main thing that I would do, on the agricultural side, was crop reporting, particularly on the bean crop. When beans were in short supply in other places, there were "export opportunities" for USDA [U. S. Department of Agriculture] sales of agricultural surpluses. The USDA wanted at one point to know what the bean crop looked like in the Danube River Valley, on the Bulgarian side of the Danube. So I called up the Agricultural Attaché in Belgrade, and would and asked how I could predict the green bean crop. He said: "Look, don't even try. Go ask a peasant how the crop is, how it compares to last year and the year before. and how he thinks the bean crop is going to be this year. Take any information that he gives you, and give it to me. Then I can predict the crop." I said: "OKAY." And I had fun doing that.

This led to one of the more amusing conversations that I had in Bulgaria. I had parked my car by the side of the road when I saw a peasant working in a bean field. I walked up to him, greeted him, and we chatted for a little bit. He said: "Where did you get your funny Bulgarian accent?" I said: "Well, I'm not a Bulgarian, I'm an American." He just laughed and laughed, then said: "Well, your parents must be Bulgarian." I said: "No, I'm just an American. I learned Bulgarian before coming here so that I could talk to people like you." He thought that was just amazing. Then I glanced up and saw that the "tail car" [secret police] was parked about a quarter of a mile back. They weren't very subtle. The "goons" were out of the car, walking around. I said to the peasant: "Do you see that car? That's my secret police 'tail.' Are you going to get into trouble for talking to me?" He said: "Oh, no. Those are local boys, and I know them. They won't do anything to me." So I got the information for green bean production. That was the kind of encounters I had.

Q: Green beans were the life of that whole area.

TICE: Yes. Another time we were on a trip and stopped in a little village whose name was Krulina Voda, which means clear water. right near the Danube River. We needed to contact a man who had served in an Ammunition Wagon Company of the Pennsylvania National Guard during World War I. Sure enough, he rolled out this long picture of the whole unit which he still had from the Great War. He pointed out who he was and gave the names of a number of the others. He was quite elderly.

When we had pulled into this little village, we noticed that it had rutted streets. You had to drive carefully or you would take off the undercarriage of your car. There were chickens and livestock

wandering around. There were few signs of electrification. It was colder than hell. We stopped and asked somebody where Gatzko so-and-so lived. He told us. Everybody knew everybody. So we went up and spent some time interviewing this one-time soldier in the U. S. Army. While we were talking to this man and looking at his documents, there was a knock on the door. A man came in to join the conversation. The lady of the house whispered to me: "It's the head of the communist party." The communist leader was very jovial and said: "It's an honor for us to have you Americans visiting us. Why don't you come over to the town council building? We'd like to invite you to have a drink and a cup of coffee with us."

We said: "Sure." So, after we had completed the interview with the old man, we went over to the town council building. The communist leader had a half dozen men gathered there, including one old peasant in traditional peasant dress, with the little fur hat and that kind of thing. He had been an original "Partizan" fighting against one thing or another for years and years. Most of the other men had also been "partisans." We sat there in our overcoats for about two hours, drinking coffee and "mastika," the Bulgarian version of absinthe. As they say: "Absinthe makes the heart grow fonder." It was getting dark. They had the windows open in this room, and it was colder than hell. The Legation officer I was with, Bud Williams, and I agreed later that people had come in looking dour. A young lady was serving the absinthe and coffee. She was unremarkable when we walked in, but by the time we left two hours later, as we discussed the matter later, she had begun to look rather pretty.

When we got up to go, the communist leader, who was getting well into his cups," said: "Well, listen, boys." He called us "boys," because we were both in our early '30s and looked awfully young to them, I guess. He said: "Look, you don't want to go all the way back to Vratza (one of the provincial capitals.) He said: "It's a cold night. Why don't you just stay here? We'll slaughter a pig and have a pig roast and a really good time. You can sleep in one of the houses here. We don't have a hotel." We were well aware of the Bulgarian peasant custom, which allegedly was still maintained in some of the villages, that when an honored guest came into town, the visitor not only got a bed but also got the services of the lady of the house, who slept with him. We did not figure that that would look good on our records, particularly as we were dealing with the local communist leader. We gave them many thanks, and begged off the invitation, staggered to our car and drove off into the night.

I probably had more fun during that tour in Bulgaria than I had in any other.

Q: I'm sure that that was true. I always look back on Yugoslavia as being the "high point" of my career. Speaking of Yugoslavia, could you say something about what you were gathering from your side of the Yugoslav border about Yugoslavia in general and how it looked? Also, how about the situation in Macedonia?

TICE: Well, that was a big issue while I was in the Legation in Sofia. If you just mentioned Macedonia or said anything about Macedonia, they would declare "Macedonia is Bulgarian." They said that there was no difference between Macedonia and Bulgaria. Well, we would say: "What about the language difference?" They would say: "No, there is no difference in the language." So there was real tension between Bulgarians and Yugoslavs on that issue.

The tensions this historical issue were heightened over a religious issue, Bulgarians considered the Patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, with his seat at Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia, to be the leader of the church in Yugoslav Macedonia as well. There was a big fuss, therefore, when the Macedonian Orthodox bishop of Skopje, the capital of the Macedonian Province in Yugoslavia, was declared "autocephalous", and therefore independent of the church in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian communist government joined the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in condemning what both saw as a Yugoslav attempt to further tighten their complete control of Macedonia as well as weaken the Bulgarian claim that "Macedonia is Bulgarian" Any Bulgar that you met resented what had happened.

An amusing side note, which was true I believe in much of the Balkans, was the continuing strong reaction to anything having to do with Turkey, harking back to the Ottoman Turk 500-year occupation of the Balkans, until near the end of the 19th century. For example, when you talked to Bulgarians, you would often find reason to say, regarding one thing or another: "Why do you do it this way?" The Bulgarian to whom you were talking would look at you very sadly and say "Pet stotine godini Turskoto Robstvo," which translates as "500 years of the Turkish yoke." [Laughter]

Q: I remember that they said the same thing in Yugoslavia. They said that the only reason that things didn't work was that they had spent 500 years under the Turkish yoke!

TICE: That's right.

Q: They used to say the same thing in Serbia. If nothing worked, they would always say that.

TICE:

In terms of Yugoslavia in general, since Yugoslavia under Tito was not a member of the "COMINFORM" [Communist Information Association, the successor to the "COMINTERN," the Communist International Organization of the 1930's], the Bulgarians did not look on Yugoslavia as a friend, because the Yugoslavs had broken off communist party relations with the Soviet Union.

Q: Did you have any information about how the Bulgarian Army was deployed?

TICE: Yes, as a part of the overall Warsaw Pact defense strategy, it was pointed at the Greek and Turkish borders. The area near those borders was a "denied area" to foreigners. The Rhodopa Mountains run all the way across the southern part of Bulgaria. You could go up into the foothills of the Rhodopas on the northern side, but the rest of the mountains, the southern slope down to the Greek and Turkish borders, were considered a "defense territory" by the Bulgarians and were closed. You even had to request permission, at least a week ahead of time, to take a road which went from Sofia down through that area into northern Greece and Salonika. The Bulgarian authorities did not want any foreigners in that area.

Q: The Soviets had no troops in Bulgaria. Is that correct?

TICE: They had military advisers with the Bulgarian armed forces, but there were no Soviet troops, in terms of operational units, in Bulgaria.

Q: While you were in Bulgaria, what was the feeling about what the role of Bulgaria would be in a general, East-West war, because war was on many people's minds?

TICE: Bulgaria would receive any "thrust" from the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] southern front.

Q: So it was basically defensive?

TICE: It was basically defensive. They were given "niche" roles in the Warsaw Pact plans. For example, Bulgaria was given a significant role in producing electronics for Soviet as well as Bulgarian and other Warsaw Pact weaponry. Bulgaria was among the more prosperous of the Eastern European countries because the Soviets favored them in many ways, giving them roles and missions, both militarily and otherwise. For example, they had Soviet help in building steel mills. It was crazy for Bulgaria to have a steel mill, as Bulgarian iron ore had a very high, sulfur content.

Q: In the Soviet system, you just "had" to have a steel mill.

TICE: Bulgaria also had these very bad, "Chernobyl" type or even older nuclear power facilities for generating electricity.

Q: How about Bulgarian relations with Turkey?

TICE: Relations with Turkey were bad. About 10 percent of the population of Bulgaria at that time was of Turkish descent. Bulgaria had gone through a process of making all people of Turkish descent change their names to Bulgarian names. For example, you couldn't be "Ali Mohammed" any more. Your name had to be something like "Petrovitch". The Bulgarians treated their Turkish minority very badly.

An educated Bulgarian, part of the ruling "establishment" once said to me: "We understand the problem that you have with the blacks in the United States, because we have our Turks," thus illustrating both his prejudice and misunderstanding of American society. It was really the worst kind of racial prejudice. Of course, this feeling against the Turks would crop up even after the communists were thrown out of power in Bulgaria. That's another sad story that we should be able to get in the oral history program by talking with people who served there when the communists fell, like Ken Hill who was the Ambassador there at that time.

Q: Some of the conditions that you are talking about in Bulgaria, in fact quite a few of the conditions, did not exist in Yugoslavia. Yugoslavs could travel around the country, and even abroad, relatively freely. If the crops were bad, particularly during the winter, you did not eat very well, but that was because of the crops. It wasn't because of government officials "confiscating" the crops. I would have thought that there would be a certain amount of jealousy

or a certain "longing" to be able to live like the Yugoslavs. Did you find any of that, or was there much information about the Yugoslavs?

TICE: There wasn't a lot of information. However, the trouble was that the general populace nobody could not get a permit to go to Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia was just "there," and was a "semi-enemy" because it had broken communist party relations with Moscow. At the time we arrived in Bulgaria, some people from our Embassy went to Nis, in Serbia, to buy meat. This practice had tapered off a little, but we went there a couple of times ourselves. Where they shopped in Nis was just an open air meat market, but it was worthwhile going there because frequently you couldn't find any meat in Bulgaria.

Q: I remember that when you went from Belgrade to Nis, you were going down to the "lower depths." We in the Embassy in Belgrade heard of people from our Embassy in Sofia going to Nis, for heaven's sake, to do their shopping! This was almost unbelievable!

TICE: I used to make people mad in the Embassy in Belgrade when I would go There. They would ask the reason for my visit, and I would say: "I'm on R&R" [Rest and Recreation]. [Laughter] There was some unhappiness because we would buy things in the Belgrade Commissary and run their supplies down. Of course, for my sins, years later I got to be President of the Commissary in the Embassy in Belgrade and I was trying to get supplies from the U. S. military bases up in Italy. They didn't like us because we'd go into the commissaries in Italy like a bunch of "thieving magpies" and clean out their best stocks. Then they'd be short of supplies.

Q: What about Bulgarian relations with Romania?

TICE: There was the usual, feigned, communist "friendship," but that's about all it was. They didn't have much to do with each other. Of course, under what I believe was the Treaty of Berlin, part of the Dobrudja area, the estuary of the Danube into the Black Sea, had been taken away from the Bulgarians and given to the Romanians, so there was a natural "tension" between the two countries built in there.

However, there was a little suspicion about them, because Georgiu Dej, the Romanian party and state leader at that time, began to liberalize Romanian foreign policy, and this became a minor irritation to Moscow-oriented Bulgaria. The Romanians lived better than the Bulgarians. We would go up to Bucharest, which even had a little, six-hole golf course at the Diplomatic Club.

By the way, to go back to relations between Bulgaria and Greece, I don't think that I talked about this aspect of it. The Bulgarians also felt that everything in Thracian Greece, down to and including Salonika, all a part of ancient Macedonia, was really Bulgarian territory. At the time I was in Bulgaria, Macedonian was still spoken fairly commonly in northern Greece, once you went outside of Salonika to the East. We would go to the island of Thasos in the Greek islands for a vacation. On the waterfront in Thasos, the northern-most of the Greek Aegean island, I could speak Bulgarian to the people, and they would understand me perfectly and reply in Macedonian, which I could understand. I doubt that's the case now, however, in a subsequent generation

Q: If I recall correctly, and now I'm speaking from the Yugoslav perspective, every once in a while linguistic conferences would be held, which practically started a Third Balkan War. The argument would be over Macedonian and whether it is a separate language or not.

TICE: The Bulgarians would show up at any international conference, particularly on linguistics, with "red eyes and fangs bared." They would defend the view that Macedonian was not a separate language. It was Bulgarian!

Q: I remember once talking to the Greek Consul in Belgrade. I mentioned that I spoke some Macedonian, because I used to go down there all the time. I was told that I was crazy. The Greek Consul said that there was no such thing as a Macedonian language. If you really wanted to get tempers going in the Balkans, the definition of what constitutes a language is sure to cause problems.

Back to your elderly, Bulgarian veterans of the U. S. Army during World War I, were they doing as my Montenegrin World War I veterans did? They all seemed to end up with very, very young wives, by whom they had children. I don't know whether they really were the fathers or what. We were paying out children's benefits based on their service during World War I. This was back in the 1960's.

TICE: I think that this practice was probably less prevalent in Bulgaria. I know of a couple of cases where there were young children from such unions but I don't recall that this was very prevalent.

Q: Before we leave your tour in Bulgaria, did the Vietnam War intrude at all?

TICE: Absolutely, both in Sofia and in Yugoslavia in the 1970's.

Q: Let's stick to Bulgaria.

TICE: In Sofia, very much so. There were at least two, destructive demonstrations against our Embassy which had to do with Vietnam. We "boycotted" a lot of Bulgarian national day events and speeches by Zhivkov and this kind of thing because of the anti-American rhetoric. Ambassador McSweeney was particular avid in his desire to make our displeasure known. He sometimes puzzled over whether it was a greater insult not to go at all to such an event, or to go and walk out when they started ranting and raving about the "imperialist United States." A third option was to send a Third Secretary, which was why I got to go to some of those events! [Laughter]

On one occasion when Khrushchev visited Bulgaria, he made "unfavorable comments" about the United States and Vietnam in his speech and McSweeney walked out. So when Khrushchev was leaving Bulgaria the next day and all Chiefs of Mission were invited to see him off at the airport, Ambassador McSweeney sent me instead of going himself for the "send off" from the Diplomatic Corps. Of course, as a Third Secretary of Legation, I wound up at the very tail end of the Diplomatic Corps at the airport, right next to a wire fence. Within the wire fence enclosure was a whole bunch of workers and peasants who had been rolled out to say good-bye to

Khrushchev. He came down the line, shaking hands with the various ambassadors and barely nodded to the man at the end, in this case, me. The peasant next to me, behind the wire fence, embraced Khrushchev, who kissed him on the mouth!

Q: If it weren't for the honor, you were just as glad...

TICE: I was happy that he hadn't mistaken me for the first peasant.

Q: What about foreign students in Bulgaria while you were there? Did they play any role?

TICE: Yes. There were many black African students there. There were some Arabs, but more from the sub-Saharan African countries. I think that this was an example of how racial prejudice worked in the communist world. Since Bulgaria was at the bottom of the European communist "pecking order," they got the black African students. It was really very sad. These youngsters would come to Sofia to go to the university without having even the equivalent of a fourth grade education. The "lucky ones" had been to missionary schools and might have had the equivalent of an eighth grade education. The Bulgarians packed the African students into quarters where, they told us, the living conditions were poor. On the other hand, they were given more money than the Bulgarian students who, therefore, resented the Africans. There were displays of open, racist prejudice by the Bulgarian kids toward the black Africans.

This situation led me to send in an airgram to the Department of State one time, when we still had airgrams as a reporting vehicle. I proposed that we should take some of our money and pay for more African students to go to Bulgarian schools because this would turn them sharply against communism. There actually was a program, which was very "hush hush" at the time, of encouraging these African kids to come in to see us. They could use our USIS [United States Information Service] library. The USIS Library was on the ground floor of the Legation, and it generally had more African students in it than anybody else. While there, they could talk to our Consular or USIA Officers. If they looked like reasonable candidates, we would pass their names along to USIA in Washington. If they could get out of Bulgaria and go to Western Europe, there was a whole operation run out of Munich to divert these students to schools in the West -- some to U. S., schools but also to schools in Western Europe.

Q: At one point, and all of a sudden, I had a tremendous "rush" of students applying for student visas to go to the U. S. There was an exodus of black African students from Bulgaria, who wanted to go to the U. S. Did that happen before you arrived in Sofia?

TICE: What year would that have been?

Q: I'm not sure what year that would have been.

TICE: It may have been during the period I was there, because they were living under really bad conditions. The discrimination against them by Bulgarian students in general was vicious.

Q: These black African students told me that they were called the equivalent in Bulgarian of "black monkeys."

TICE: Yes, "Mai mouna" was a term used by Bulgarian students for the African students.

Q: Were there demonstrations against the Legation regarding our African policies?

TICE: No, I think that they were principally directed against our Vietnam policies. There had been, before I arrived in Sofia, a very destructive demonstration at the Legation related to accusations that a former Bulgarian diplomat, named Assen Georgiev was a U.S. spy. Georgiev had been assigned to the UN in New York. When he came back to Bulgaria, the Bulgarian security authorities arrested him and accused him of being a spy for the U. S. When he was being tried in a classic "show trial" popular in that era they implicated a Legation staff member, who they photographed in what they claimed was a compromising situation having to do with Georgiev. That riot took place while I was nearing the end of Bulgarian language training. Georgiev was executed, as was, years later, a medical doctor whose services were frequently employed by members of the Diplomatic Corps. After I had left Bulgaria, he was arrested and executed. Too much contact with Westerners was not a good thing for anybody in Bulgaria at that time.

Q: What impression did you have of Zhivkov and the people around him?

TICE: They were rather unimaginative, "hard line" communist types. You didn't see anything like imagination. There was no "flair," or anything like that. That was why Georghiu Dej was such an odd character. He was...

Q: He was a Romanian, wasn't he?

TICE: Yes, he seemed actually to think for himself, whereas the Bulgarians all just "hewed" to the Soviet line. I could read the opening paragraphs of a speech by Todor Zhivkov, put the newspaper aside and write the rest of it, because they were all the same.

Q: Did you play the game of "Kremlinology"? Who was standing where, in the lineup of Bulgarian leaders at a public ceremony?

TICE: Oh, yes, we did that all the time, which was pretty futile in a place like Bulgaria. But what else are you going to do when you're there? [Laughter] The only really interesting and different event while I was there was the "April conspiracy", which I mentioned earlier, which we learned about in Tirnovo. It was the first and only occasion, up until recent times, when there was an attempted, military overthrow of a ruling communist regime.

It wasn't that Todorov-Gorunya was a raging liberal. It's just that he was the other, main guerrilla leader, a rival of Zhivkov's. He had been relegated to living a quiet life in Vratza on the other side of the mountains. He and his supporters tried to take over Bulgaria. They had a part of the Bulgarian Army with them, and that sort of thing. It was more of a musical comedy sort of event than anything else, but it was significant.

Q: What happened to them?

TICE: I think that Todorov-Gorunya was executed. Several other people, including a couple of Army commanders, were sacked from their positions and jailed. One guy reportedly threw himself off the top of a building about two blocks from the American Legation. That was it.

Q: When did you leave Bulgaria?

TICE: In the summer of 1967.

Q: Did the coup d'etat in Greece in April, 1967, have any effect in Bulgaria? This was when the Greek Army "colonels" took over.

TICE: There was some "saber rattling" and that kind of thing, and some ranting about the "fascist Greeks," but nothing serious. We traveled down to Greece shortly after that and had no problem crossing the border.

Q: It was a good time to go, in fact. The tourists had been pretty well "flushed out" of Greece. I went down there right after that. What about the Soviets? Did you get any feel from the people you talked to about the attitude of the Bulgarians toward the Russians?

TICE: Yes. This attitude is historic in origin. Sofia was the only Eastern European capital under communism where they still had a statue of a Russian czar. I think that it was of Nicholas I, "the Czar Liberator." In 1878 Russian troops came into Bulgaria and ran the Turks out. Even when I was in Bulgaria, the Bulgarians still had very warm feelings toward the Russians because they had liberated Bulgaria from the "Turkish Yoke". They were considered "our Russian big brothers." Now, the Bulgarian youth were beginning to say that a little snidely. However, if you talked to anybody over 40 years old, it was clear that they felt this attachment to the Russians deeply. So the Russians weren't "resented" in the same way that they were in other Eastern European countries.

HANS N. TUCH
Deputy Chief of Mission
Sofia (1965-1967)

Hans Tuch came to the United States from Germany in 1938 as a 14-year- old. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and gained enough active combat points to be discharged early. He finished his B.A. at the University of Kansas in 1947, received an MA at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and worked for Chase National Bank. The bank sent him to Germany, where he quit and was immediately hired by the State Department. Mr. Tuch transferred to USIA when it was created in 1953, during his assignment to Germany. Subsequently, he served in Washington, Moscow, Bulgaria, Brazil, other posts in Germany, and as acting director of Voice of America. He was interviewed on January 19, 1988 by Benis Frank, February 24, 1988 by "Cliff" Groce, and on August 4, 1989 by G. Lewis Schmidt.

TUCH: I was asked to go to Bulgaria as Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) and Art Hummel was assigned to Taiwan as Deputy Chief of Mission. We were the first two non-State department officers to be assigned as DCM. Of course, he went on to great things after his assignment in Taiwan, became ambassador to Burma, Pakistan, and China. So I went off to Bulgaria as DCM and spent two years in Sofia from 1965 to 1967.

Q: Before we go more deeply into your work in Bulgaria, I'd like to ask you a preliminary question. In the course of your assignment as the DCM in Bulgaria, did you find that in some respects you were acting like a USIS officer? Were you doing anything or did you do anything in that occasion which you might very well have done had you been the PAO in the country?

TUCH: We did have a PAO, or rather a press and cultural attaché John Clayton; Tim Pfeiffer in the first instance succeeded by John Clayton. But being really essentially a public affairs type, I found that being a DCM, I could be a better public affairs officer than I could ever have been as a public affairs officer because I had the opportunity to get out and communicate, especially during my two years there in Sofia. I spent almost half my tour of duty as a chargé.

Sofia was one of the last two legations in the American Foreign Service. We had raised all of our missions throughout the world to embassy status with the exception of Budapest and Sofia. Budapest because we had a very bad relationship with the Hungarians at that time since we were "hosting" Cardinal Mindszenty. In Bulgaria, we did not have a very good relationship either. Budapest and Sofia were our two last legations, and historically, speaking I was the last Counselor of Legation in the Foreign Service.

When we raised both to embassy status in the spring of 1967, we didn't want to do it separately; we wanted to raise Budapest and Sofia at the same time. The issue with Cardinal Mindszenty didn't get resolved and, therefore, neither one of the two legations was changed. In the meantime, we had had a change of chiefs of mission. Nathaniel Davis, who had been the American Minister in Sofia until the spring of 1966, left precipitously. He was not *persona non grata*, but he was withdrawn by the U.S. Government as a result of an automobile accident, and there was a major commotion between our two governments at that time. He was finally withdrawn. His successor, John McSweeney, didn't want to arrive and be a minister and then be raised to ambassador. He wanted to wait until he came as an ambassador, so we had a long interim during which time I was the chargé. Then finally he did come, because there was no immediate change of status in prospect. He came as a Minister and then was changed to become an Ambassador about three or four months later.

At any rate, the opportunities in Bulgaria for a public affairs program, whether run by a PAO [Public Affairs Officer] or by the DCM, were still very limited, about as limited as they were in the Soviet Union. The relationship could not be established. It was somewhat easier to deal with Bulgarians than the Soviets, and you found people in the population, people on the street that you met, easier to make contact with and easier to talk to. It was, I'd say, a softer system of communism even though Todor Zhivkov was, at that time, the head of the party and government and, of course, he still is today. He was not expected to last that long, but he lasted longer than anyone else.

One of the interesting things that happened during that time was that we participated for the first time with an exhibit at the Plovdiv International Trade Fair in 1966, and Senator Magnuson was the American official representative to come to Sofia for this exhibit. Senator Magnuson, who just died last month, and his wife came - very charming people, both of them - and, fortunately for me, they were accompanied by Leonard Marks, who had become the Director of USIA. This was his first trip to the Soviet Bloc. I had not met him before, but he came to Sofia actually a day ahead of the Magnusons and was very helpful to me. I was chargé at the time, there was no ambassador or minister. He was helpful to me in giving me suggestions and advice on how to handle Senator Magnuson; they were very good friends.

It turned out that Leonard was a very pleasant person, cooperative in every respect. I had arranged for a visit by Senator Magnuson with Todor Zhivkov, the Chairman of the Party and the government. Leonard said to me, "Tom, you are in charge here, you decide who should accompany Senator Magnuson. Of course you are going, but you decide who should go and I will abide by your decision."

And I said, "Of course, Leonard, you've got to come along. You should come along, too."

Leonard said, "But I will not say a word during the conversation, I'll just be there and it'll be very interesting to attend; but I won't say anything."

Well, I knew Leonard Marks by that time and I didn't think that this was going to be the way he announced it. And sure enough we had been with Zhivkov about three minutes whereupon Leonard Marks interrupted and said, "Mr. Chairman, there's only one thing that I really would like to ask you. Why do you still jam the Voice of America? You are the only country in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union that still jams the Voice of America." At that time, I should interject, the Soviet Union had stopped jamming. After the signing of the partial nuclear test ban treaty, they stopped jamming the Voice of America and did not commence again until August 1968 during the invasion of Czechoslovakia. And all the other Eastern European countries had also stopped jamming the Voice of America, with one exception, Bulgaria. This was sort of a significant element of our relationship, they still jammed us.

So here was Leonard Marks asking Zhivkov, "Why do you still jam the Voice of America?" Zhivkov, who was not known to be very fast on the draw, outdid himself on this occasion. He said, "Mr. Director, I could stop jamming the Voice of America just like that," he snapped his finger, "But if I did that, what would you and I then have to talk about?" For once, Leonard Marks was speechless.

And then he continued. He said, "You know, Mr. Director, I will stop jamming the Voice of America if you'll do one thing for me."

Leonard Marks asked him, "What is that?"

And he said, "If you give us most-favored-nation treatment so that we can trade with you on an equal basis. End of conversation." [Laughter.]

The relationship with Bulgaria was a tough one, but as I said earlier, it was for me, having spent three years in the Soviet Union, a somewhat easier system with which to deal than in Moscow.

Of course, the climate is better than the Soviet Union. It's a small country, it's a beautiful country when one travels around Bulgaria. Rugged mountains and the sea shore and you have a decent climate, so the atmosphere and the whole ambience in Bulgaria was somewhat different. For most of my colleagues, however, it was a very tough post because it literally was the end of the line. Namely, all airlines, if they even went to Sofia, would go to Sofia turn around and go back West.

Q: I want to ask you one more thing. You mentioned that you did get out and around and talk to people, did you feel that because of the fact that you had the title of DCM, chargé, or whatever the case might have been, you were able to make contacts and open some doors that were closed to you had you just been a PAO in the country?

TUCH: I think that it's true to a certain extent, especially as a chargé. I would ride around the countryside in the official car with the American flag flying. That alone was always an entree because Bulgarians felt friendly towards Americans, and if they saw the American chief of mission's car coming down the road with the American flag flying, they would literally stand beside the road waving in a friendly way. That gave one a good feeling, I must admit. I mean this was completely separate from our relationship with the Bulgarian Government which was not particularly good at the time.

Q: I gather that's about, for the moment at least, all you want to say about Bulgaria. Why don't you pick it up from there.

TUCH: Well, after Bulgaria I was assigned as PAO in Berlin.

RICHARD A. DWYER
Political/Economic Officer
Sofia (1970-1972)

Richard A. Dwyer was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1933. He completed an A.B. degree at Dartmouth College in 1955, and then earned an M.A. degree in Public Affairs at Princeton University in 1957. After college, he went directly into the Foreign Service. Mr. Dwyer's overseas career included posts in Syria, Egypt, Bulgaria, Chad, Guyana, and Martinique. He was interviewed by Professor Charles Stuart Kennedy on July 12, 1990.

Q: I would like to move on from this period. You then got yourself back overseas. You served in Sofia from 1970-72. How did that assignment come about and what were you doing?

DWYER: Well, the assignment came about because although I had very much enjoyed my work

with the Scandinavians - it was great - I had always had a longing to go to Eastern Europe and I had applied for and was accepted for the Serbo-Croatian language training where I was to be the second man in the political section there. I had my assignment cut short, which was very nicely done by my immediate superior, and got through approximately eight weeks of Serbo-Croatian language training only to discover that the guy who I was to succeed changed his mind and had requested that he be extended for another year. This left me high and dry without a job.

We had just adopted a child and I didn't want to accept an immediate overseas assignment because I had to be in the District of Columbia six months for the adoption to be final. Obviously, my wife and I did not want anything to go wrong. I was, therefore, unwilling to take a chance with something going wrong with the adoption process which would cease if we went overseas and we would have to do it again when we came back. I was offered Bulgaria - was harassed with Bulgaria - but a Foreign Service classmate of mine, Don Tice, who had served in Bulgaria said this is not something that you really want to do, and I didn't want to do it. But after eight weeks of Serbo-Croatian and no other job, I could have gone on and finished Serbo-Croatian but there was no job prospect in sight and seemed like a waste. We agreed reluctantly to go to Bulgaria. I in some ways still regret it, but I then switched over to Bulgarian language training which was kind of a disaster because I sounded like a Macedonian, rather than a Bulgar..

Q: I took Serbo-Croatian and found I could talk to Bulgarians very slowly and they could talk to me very slowly and we could get along fine, but obviously they are two different languages.

DWYER: They are indeed two different languages. We got there in early summer or spring of 1970. It was a really remarkably dull country in terms of what was going on. The Soviet Ambassador was referred to as the pro-consul which indeed he was. It had many of the disadvantages of Moscow without the advantage of knowing you are in a major country - major player.

Q: No Bolshoi Theater or anything like that.

DWYER: Well, a pretty decent opera. Boris Christoff would come back and do a good Mose once or twice, but then there would be only one or two tickets for the Embassy and that was it and you never saw him anyway.

There were many of the same problems as in Moscow. There were the secret police, the constant surveillance and living in the golden ghetto - which certainly was a ghetto, but not all that golden. It was terribly difficult on the spouses, on my wife, because at least we could go to the office and have our work to do and its a characteristic of the Foreign Service Officer that he can be in a country for a few weeks and he can convince himself that it is really important, whether it is or not, but at least give a little seasoning to the work. Whereas the wives were pretty much confined to other diplomat corps wives. It was not a very exciting place.

I had a little experiment of bringing in vegetables from Yugoslavia because in the winter we got no fresh vegetables whatsoever and we pretty soon got tired of cabbage and pickled cabbage.

Q: And turnip salad?

DWYER: Yeah.

Q: *We had a lot of turnip salad.*

DWYER: A number of us arranged with one of these transfer firms to bring in some fresh fruits and vegetables around the Christmas season. Of course, they just disappeared and two weeks after they had arrived and were, of course, spoiled, Customs called up and said, "Oh, by the way we forgot to tell you that you have a shipment down there." We didn't try that again.

A lot of people depended on the Commissary in Athens. We would send a truck down occasionally, but I didn't like that to begin with. A few of us, and I found this quite helpful, hunted quite a bit - wild pheasant, quail and grouse. This kept meat on the table because the only thing you could buy in meat generally in the winter time was a fairly decent tenderloin, but there is only so many tenderloins you can eat and frozen chickens. That was about it. And, of course, we did better than the Bulgarians did. But the Bulgarians had what we didn't have -- there was no Bulgarian alive who didn't have relatives back in the village and on the farm.

Q: *Were there any major policy problems? You say it was a pretty dull time.*

DWYER: No. Absolutely none that I can think of in terms of policies. I was political/economic officer with an assistant and a secretary. The Embassy was limited by the Bulgarian government to, I think it was 21 people which included 8 marines. The economic job in many ways was a better job than any other because there were things that the Bulgarians wanted to buy and certainly things Americans wanted to sell, or at least some American firms. That gave me access to a certain level of Bulgarian officialdom: the Chamber of Commerce, the Department of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Foreign Trade.

As far as policies were concerned there, our policy towards Bulgaria was whatever was left over after our policy towards the Soviet Union. There was not much distinction made between the two, and I suppose rightly so. We were interested in specifically any Bulgarian interest in the Middle East, and of course Bulgaria was sitting on the flank of two NATO countries, Greece and Turkey. There is nothing that the Greeks and Turks don't know about the Bulgarians and vice versa. Nobody is going to watch a Bulgarian more closely than a Turk. There was a large Turkish embassy and a couple of consulate generals there. The Greeks were going through several governments at the time, Colonels and what have you, it was pretty quiet there. The Bulgarians were smart enough not to tempt the Yugoslavs too greatly - any claims to Macedonia or things like that. They were aware of the problems of the territory that was still contested between the two countries and while they made the proper noises that it was still Greater Bulgaria they weren't going to tempt Tito to have a little show of force or something and the Soviets probably wouldn't have permitted it anyway.

The Soviets had military facilities there but not troops stationed there. We were interested in those. I had my best weekend of my tour in Bulgaria when I was out looking for Warsaw Pact maneuvers over in the Balkan mountains, which are inland from and run parallel to the Danube River. We had heard that there were maneuvers out there so we thought we would go and see if

we could find them. The map showed a secondary road going over the Balkans, and I, by that time, had driven over most of Bulgaria and said "let's try it" to my wife. Near the top of this road I broke the oil pan and there we were with my American car equipped with power steering, power brakes, etc. and no engine. There was nothing around; the road was just a dirt track. I turned off the motor because I had lost all the oil and coasted down the other side of the mountain and into the little village of Stara Lycar. The head of the state farm came out and the first thing he asked me was did I know that I was the first wheeled vehicle that had come over that route since the Second World War. It was the Soviet jeeps and tanks that had come over. Anyway there we were.

The village was the headquarters of the state farm, the forestry farm, and the people, as was true in the villages almost anywhere, could not have been nicer. My major concern, as was everyone's concern in the Embassy, was not to get people in trouble with the secret police, etc. so there was a two-room hotel over the general store where we got a room. Then we tried to call the Embassy; we had an Embassy truck, but it had gone to Athens to fill up with commissary goods and wasn't going to be back for a day or two. So we had dinner at a little cafe that was part of the general store. Before we knew it we had as company the deputy director of the state farm who was the acting director of it, and a guy from the commissariat to the mayor's office, and a third guy. The *slivovitz* was beginning to be passed with great regularity and it looked like a long evening. I said that I hoped everyone understand that I was a diplomat from the American Embassy and, although delighted to have their company, wanted to be certain they understood who I was. The third guy, who I wasn't sure of, said, "Don't worry, I am the secret police guy, we have checked you out and it is okay." My wife saw the male bonding going on and went off to bed.

We sat there a while with a second bottle of *slivovitz*. Finally the guy from the state farm said, "Listen I think we can fix this guy's car." There was only one car in the village which belonged to the director of the state farm and he wasn't there, so there weren't any cars in the village at that time. They had trucks, but no cars. We left the cafe singing Bulgarian songs, some of them I didn't know I knew. Somebody came along with a truck from the state farm and we tied my car on behind it and tooled off down the road about midnight or one in the morning to the machine tractor station. There was a veteran sitting guarding the gates with his little fire. We all pounded on the gates and said let us in. He said I can't let you. They prevailed on him and finally he agreed to let us in if we had a couple of drinks with him. So we opened up the gates and pushed the car up on the concrete oil changing ramps, used for changing the oil of tractors, that fortunately fit. We proceeded to drink some more and then went back to the hotel. By this time I am surprised I found it; I wouldn't have without the help of the Bulgarians.

I went to bed and got up in the morning with the most horrible *slivovitz* hangover that I ever had, with the big notion that I had pushed my car up on a piece of concrete somewhere but wasn't quite sure. I went down and there were all my buddies waiting for me at breakfast as chipper as could be. We got into the truck and went out there. The whole state farm stopped work because here was a modern American car with all the fancy goodies Americans have in their cars. It was a Mercury with the old 6 1/2 Liter Ford V-8 engine which I had gotten by mistake. When we took the oil pan out, the whole oil pump dropped out. I thought, "Oh God, we will never get it back up." The blacksmith beat out the oil pan and welded it. The apprentice cut a new gasket from cork and then we put it back on only to discover that we didn't have any oil. There were

only trucks and tractors in the village. Somebody came up with two cans of oil that were reserved for the director's automobile and we poured them in there and then we filled it up with tractor oil. We drove back to the village, about a mile and a half away, with everybody in the back seat. It must have been eight of us in the car.

Nobody allowed us to pay for anything -- hotel room, food, nothing. I said to the deputy director let me at least buy a few bottles of *slivovitz*, but they wouldn't hear of it. Finally the guy from the tractor station said you know what you could do, we would love to drive your car. We spent the whole afternoon driving that car up and down this dirt road and I think everyone in the village who knew how to drive and two or three who didn't, drove the car. We left as very good friends.

A year later, the guy from the machine tractor station walked into the Embassy in Sofia -- we had militia outside who normally would not let Bulgarians in unless they had business and could prove that they had business. There was this great commotion outside the door and somebody went out and here was my friend who told the militia where to get off and proceeded to walk in and said he wanted to see his friend Dwyer, which sent all the spooks right up the wall. I came down to see him and said, "Stanov you just walked in here?" He said, "Sure why not? I just tell the militia off." So, I called my wife Sally at home and said, "Sally, Stanov is here." We really wanted to do something for him, but we didn't want to have him over to the apartment because it is in a secured building and we knew we were bugged, etc. He was a bit of a rustic and we didn't want to take him to a fancy hotel. So we ended up at what was called the Makana, a very nice place like a Greek taverna.

Stanov was his expansive self. We get down there and the waiter comes up and says would you like a *slivovitz*, and I thought of my Finnish friends who would say at that point, "goodbye clear day" and said, "Well, maybe just one." Stanov said no way and brings out of his beat up briefcase his homemade *slivovitz*. The waiter said, "You can't serve that in here." Stanov said, "I wouldn't drink your crap that you call *slivovitz*." I said to the waiter, "Okay, bring the *slivovitz*." Stanov poured it onto the floor and we drank his!

Outside of that, policy matters of Bulgarian foreign policy we had almost nothing. There was a little on the Vietnam thing. We had the Viet Cong represented in Bulgaria to say nothing of the Hanoi government, North Koreans -- all the people we didn't like. The Mongolian, who shot the head off the Chief of Protocol at the diplomatic hunt and a few others like that. It wasn't bad. We had a mountain cabin in the village where we could get away, but outside of that it was pretty deadly dull.

ROBERT RACKMALES
Albania and Bulgaria Desk Officer
Washington, DC (1970-1972)

Robert Rackmales was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1937. He studied history at Johns Hopkins University and graduated in 1958. He received a Fulbright Scholarship to Germany and this influenced him toward his entry into the Foreign

Service in 1963. He had twice served in Nigeria, Yugoslavia and Italy at various rotations. He was interviewed by Professor Charles Stuart Kennedy on May 11, 1995.

Q: *When you left [Indiana University at Bloomington] in 1970 where did you go?*

RACKMALES: Back to the Department as the desk officer for Albania and Bulgaria.

Q: *Could you talk about. . .this would be '70 to '72, because Albania and Bulgaria hardly ever raised a blip on our radar which in a way was kind of fun because they were yours.*

RACKMALES: That's right. I was the government expert on those two places, and none of my superiors had direct experience on either one. So on the few occasions when something came up that got the Secretary's or Under Secretary's attention, you were drawn on more than if you were the German desk officer, because then you've got all kinds of expertise in between. But with those two countries I would get calls from the White House. I remember Senator Weicker had a very strong interest in Albania for reasons that escape me for the moment.

Q: *Weicker from Connecticut?*

RACKMALES: Connecticut, yes. He was trying to get into Albania, he wanted to go there. So I would go over and brief him on the situation there and suggest ways that he could try to get in. Of course, I warned him that we had no relations; in fact, there is no protecting power so if you run into a problem there's nothing we can do. But that didn't deter him from trying. During the two years that I was on the desk there was a shift in the mindset about Albania where it went from, "Hell no, we have no interest in relations" to Deputy Secretary Rusk saying, "We are prepared if the Albanians are interested to look towards the resumption of relations", which I don't think anyone expected because the Albanians in that period were in their most isolationist phase and would have seen it as a real threat to themselves to make any gesture to the United States. I was in favor of that kind of shift in policy because I thought it was a more realistic approach than the one that simply ignored the existence of this little country.

Q: *Were you privy at all to what brought around the changes? Just personalities within the State Department, or what?*

RACKMALES: I perhaps played some small role in that. Dick Davies who was the Deputy Assistant Secretary at that point for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was supportive. A part of the attention in those years to Albania was prompted by a request that the Italian government made to us to trade property. We owned the building in Tirana which the Italians were using as their chancery and residence. They paid us rent, so they were our tenants. I think it was in 1971 they said, "We have some property in Bucharest which we don't need, or we're giving up, and we would be happy to swap that with you." Our embassy in Bucharest was very strongly in favor of it, and were lobbying very hard for us to accept the Italian offer. I was making the case that at some point we would want to go back in, that there are damn few suitable properties - in fact, no suitable property in Tirana, and that we don't want to give this up because at some point we'll need it. In fact, it is still the property, it is now the residence and the chancery, and I'm told the

best property in Tirana. Anyway, my arguments carried the day, and it could be that there was a spillover effect because again it was one of the few times when you got some attention from the Seventh Floor.

Q: How did we deal with the Albanian government? Can you describe how we saw it, and any interest the Americans might have in the problems of the Albania situation?

RACKMALES: It was at a time when Stalinism had virtually disappeared from the rest of Eastern Europe. Albania was the last refuge of Stalinism. The human rights situation in Albania was far worse than anywhere else. The only comparison today would be North Korea. There was a feeling that ultimately the Albanians would have to reenter Europe, that their strategy of becoming an entirely isolated outpost supported by China could not last. So it was a question of time. I don't think any of us expected any immediate change there because the control was so tight. The Chinese in those years hadn't yet gotten tired of supporting this tiny little country. So it seemed like a fairly stable situation. We were positioning ourselves for a future role.

Q: How about Bulgaria? There we had relations. What was the situation '70-'72?

RACKMALES: Relations were very limited. There were some commercial relations. I remember General Motors imported a lot of wine and this was the result of a deal whereby General Motors had shipped some either auto parts or factory components and took its payment in Bulgarian wine which I was told that they used as a component in making anti-freeze. Now it's marketed in supermarkets, but in those days it was pretty unusual. Political relations were obviously very, very cool. I guess the main thing that happened in the two years that I was on the desk was the beginning of a more active customs cooperation designed to impede the flow of drugs through Bulgaria. There was a visit to Bulgaria by the head of U.S. customs, who was very well received by his Bulgarian counterpart, and at least the customs officials were quite happy with the beginning of a more active Bulgarian participation in the anti-drug efforts. Beyond that I think we sent the astronauts to Bulgaria on a goodwill visit. Around that time the Bulgarian embassy was shaken when their third ranking person got picked up for shop lifting in Woodies.

Q: This Woodies is a department store.

RACKMALES: The ambassador was an old party hack who invited my wife and me regularly for dinner with some of our State Department colleagues. The yoghurt was great. I don't believe they had a very active embassy because of the ambassador's age, and lack of fluency in English.

Q: How about our representation in Bulgaria? What was your impression of our embassy and what it was to do there?

RACKMALES: We obviously had little leverage with the Bulgarians; trade wasn't significant. There was no political leverage because they took their orders from Moscow. We had a small embassy given the level of work, but I think they did a competent job. We had a series of professional ambassadors. John McSweeney was there when I started on the desk, and then Tully Torbert was the ambassador for the second half of my tour. I helped him go through the confirmation process, and visited him the second year I was on the desk.

Q: Was Turkey a problem with the Bulgarians?

RACKMALES: Not in those years. Not too many years after that you began to get the crack-down on the Bulgarian Turks, the banning of Turkish names, etc., but that happened in the '80s. There probably were tensions even then in the Turkish areas, but we had very restricted access. I don't recall if we had any Turkish language officers in the embassy in the early '70s as we did in the '80s. In the '80s we had some very fluent Turkish speakers who facilitated our access there. I went back to Sofia in '86 at the height of the pressures and the concern about the Bulgarian Turks. In fact, when they were fleeing by hundreds of thousands from Bulgaria. But in the early '70s I just don't recall our having focused on that situation.

Q: How about Macedonia as a Bulgarian issue? Did you find yourself clashing with either the Yugoslav or Greek desks?

RACKMALES: In the early '70s one of the ways the Soviets, when they were annoyed at the Yugoslavs, would show their annoyance would be to let the Bulgarians publish something about Macedonia. I think there were one or two episodes of that in that period. The Bulgarians would piously say, "This doesn't represent any political move; these are just historians writing and it has nothing to do with claims on another country." But the Yugoslav Macedonians would be furious, and say that's nonsense, these are all state employees and they couldn't do this without permission, that sort of thing. I don't think we got overly excited about that particular thing because it was viewed more as a way the Soviets had of conducting a little war of nerves.

Q: Did you have the feeling at that time that the Soviets were pretty much calling Bulgaria's foreign relations?

RACKMALES: Yes, I think that was pretty much a given. There might have been regional issues where the Bulgarians would be given some leeway, but on all of the major issues they stuck to the Soviet line.

Q: Was Bulgaria seen as a Balkan military power?

RACKMALES: No, I don't think so. Because I don't think anyone ever foresaw that operating independently so that if it came to any military conflict which would have involved Bulgaria there was a much stronger force there. The attachés, I'm sure, followed the question of the size, capabilities, because that's their job. I don't think it was ever viewed as a kind of separate, independent variable as opposed to the capabilities of the Soviet Union militarily.

Q: You left the Department in '72 for a garden spot. To Mogadishu. You were there from '72 to '73?

RACKMALES: That's right.

HORACE G. TORBERT
Ambassador
Bulgaria (1970-1973)

Horace G. Torbert grew up in Washington, DC. He graduated from Yale in 1932, and attended Harvard Business School. During his career he has been posted in Vienna, Western European Affairs, Rome, and Budapest. He was also the Ambassador to Somalia and Bulgaria, and the Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations. He was interviewed by Professor Charles Stuart Kennedy on August 31, 1988.

Q: In 1970, you were appointed as ambassador to Bulgaria.

TORBERT: Yes, that's right.

Q: How did this appointment come about?

TORBERT: Bill Macomber felt he owed me something by this and he did. [Laughter.] He wanted to give me a resting place. They had decided fairly early, I guess, that Dave Abshire would come in, but he wasn't available immediately, so they kept me on as acting beginning about election time, up until mid-1970, when Dave Abshire was confirmed as assistant secretary. I was there, and Bill was looking for a place to park me afterwards. Embassies, of course, were pretty tight because the Republicans had a lot of obligations to fulfill and so on, and I felt I was too old and my wife was too old to go back to another primitive African post, of which I was offered several.

Finally, they got down to Bulgaria, which I knew wasn't an all-that-important place, but I thought it would be interesting. It was sort of a retirement post, and quite frankly, that's what it was. As soon as Dave Abshire got broken in, and that didn't take much because he was a savvy type of fellow, I started to study Bulgarian. I never learned very much, but I learned enough to listen and at least to ask a question occasionally.

I went out there, and it was the ideal retirement post. There was almost nothing to do. Our relations with Bulgaria were absolutely minimal. The Bulgarians happened to be the only satellite country that really welcomed the Russians with open arms, because they were liberated from the Turks by the Russians, even though it was a czar in 1878, and most of their government was trained by the Communists under the *Comintern* system, in the thirties. The Soviets had no trouble whatever.

Furthermore, I mentioned a while back the question of American immigration and the populations in this country. Of all the Eastern European countries, there were less Bulgarian immigrants to the United States than any other. I think there were perhaps 50,000 people in the United States who claimed Bulgarian ancestry, whereas you know, it ranks in the millions for most.

Q: I served in Yugoslavia, and they have a very large amount.

TORBERT: For the size of the country, a tremendous number.

Q: *What were our interests in Bulgaria?*

TORBERT: Our interests in Bulgaria consisted of flying the flag. It's a sovereign country, it's not an insignificant country, it's got ten million people, and it's in a strategic area. We have relations with everybody. It was much more important than a lot of embassies we had at that time.

Q: *No particularly commercial or geopolitical interests?*

TORBERT: Their principal export was tobacco, and we weren't about to encourage that particularly. They were always yammering for a most-favored-nation treatment, which would have allowed them to send us some exports. They talked about themselves as the largest exporters of bottled wine in the world, which they could statistically prove they were because the key word was "bottled," and they had a contract to sell 200 million bottles of wine a year to the Soviet Union. [Laughter.]

But it's an agricultural country, a not unpleasant country. We had a very interesting time there. It was the first time we had been in that part of Europe and looked east rather than west. The influence has been Turkish and Russian there. The scenery is nice, it's only two or three hours from Thessaloniki in Greece. I couldn't, of course, hop out, but my wife, when she wanted to get a breather, would get in the car and drive down to Greece to stock up on provisions such as Bulgarian lamb which was not available on the Bulgarian market. So it was a pleasant place, and I unwound rather slowly. I went the rounds and made the efforts, but quite frankly, there was very little working relationship.

The only thing of significance that happened while I was there was that we got into discussions with the Bulgarians on the control of the drug traffic. Much to my surprise, they showed some interest in trying to cooperate. They were important because a major flow of Middle Eastern and Far Eastern drugs was carried in the very heavy international truck traffic that went through. We were aware that a major part of that flow was in these TIR trucks.

So we started talking to them about cooperation and this sort of thing, and much to our surprise, they seemed to be interested. One of the problems that we had was that the control of drugs was more divided then than it is now within the United States Government. There were individual duchies in the Treasury Department, Customs, Bureau of Tobacco Alcohol and Firearms, the Justice Department, maybe a couple of others. One of them would say they wanted to negotiate with the Bulgarians, then all of a sudden, another one would come up and say, "You can't negotiate." [Laughter.] But anyway, finally we did get their Commissioner of Customs and somebody else to come to this country on a visit, and we were allowed to tell them some of the things that we did, some of the ways of inhibiting drug traffic. They made a couple of stops of smugglers for us.

We never were absolutely sure whether they were just trying to find out something about our method, you know. You couldn't be sure. But at least we educated a few of them and they did

talk to us. We made some progress in the drug control situation. Other than that, there was very little. . .

Q: Did you have much contact with the head of government, Todor Zhivkov?

TORBERT: I made calls on him when I arrived, and they were very correct about this sort of thing. I made calls on all members of the government, including Zhivkov. It was an exercise. I'd write reports about it, describe it. Of course, I did business fairly regularly with the foreign office. Their security control was at least as rigorous as the Hungarians had been. I was used to that by this time, of course.

One of the major things that you have with the smaller posts is maintaining the morale of your people, the morale and the conduct, I might say, and maintaining the morale of Western allies. Particularly, as I said, in the case of Hungary, if there were Latinos there, they very often needed to have their hands held.

We had a NATO group there from most of the NATO countries. Not all of them were represented. I developed very good relations with the Greek ambassador, who has been there a long time and, of course, Bulgaria was a very important relationship for the Greeks.

Q: Having served my five years in Belgrade, did you manage to keep out of the Macedonian dispute? This is Greece, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria, all having vehement claims on what is mainly Yugoslavia today, the area called Macedonia.

TORBERT: That's right. Of course, historically, for generations, it's been a problem in the whole area. The Bulgarians used to hang Macedonians from the lamp posts in the city squares, I understand, before the Second World War.

The only time that I can recall getting at all involved in this is when I picked up a MemCon from Dick Davies, who was later ambassador to Poland. He was Deputy Assistant Secretary for Eastern Europe at that time, and in talking to a Yugoslav in the office, he had said something that sounded very much to me like endorsing the Yugoslav position on Macedonia. This bothered me, not because I wanted to expound the Bulgarian position at all - I couldn't have cared less, and I didn't figure it was any of our business - but because I'd had some experience in this kind of thing, particularly in the South Tyrol-Alto Adige problem between Austria and Italy. In Italy it's called Alto Adige, the upper Adige River. In Austria, it's called the Sud Tyrol, and it's the same area. It was ceded to Italy after the First World War. From an ethnic point of view, it was an outrageous cession, but when you lost a war in those days you were pretty apt to lose territory.

Partly from my own efforts, we kept from ever getting deeply involved in that problem. Eventually, they settled it pretty well between themselves. It still flares up occasionally and is still going on today, but at least we didn't get involved in it. I was afraid it sounded like the Department was getting involved in this problem, so I sent a short wire, followed up by a longer letter, saying this, and saying that I was in no sense trying to support the Bulgarian view, but I hoped that this did not mean we were getting involved in this thing.

I got back a rather plaintive letter from Davies, in which he seemed to miss the point entirely.

Q: I don't think anybody who hasn't served in that particular area understands the depth of feeling over something. They're buried so deep and they will explode, so you become very attuned to them. Somebody outside thinks this is one of these petty little quarrels, and it's deeper than that.

TORBERT: No, this is a century-old problem. Anyway, that is the only time I can remember being involved in this. I eventually shut up, because I really didn't care.

Q: One last question about Bulgaria. You were there when we were really putting the pressure on in Vietnam, including bombing. The Bulgarians had ships in the wrong place at Haiphong, and their embassy was damaged during the Christmas raids of '72 in Hanoi. How did this affect you?

TORBERT: We were obviously in a continuous propaganda war with the Bulgarians. Curiously, I don't remember the issue of the damage to the Bulgarian Embassy or property being a serious point with me, I mean, a point that I had to deal with. I can't really remember that clearly enough, but I do remember lots of incidents. About our only form of internal propaganda in Sofia was a show window that we had on the first floor of the embassy, in which we put up exhibits. It was one of the best shows in town, in-so-far as it was right downtown Sofia, and we used to get hundreds and hundreds of people a day to stop and read everything that was in the window, look at it and so on. We did have an exhibit at one time that had to do with our explanation of the bombing of Cambodia, I think, or some bombing that we were doing. I may be confused with the earlier bombings. But it had something to do with that.

We got a phone call threatening to bomb the embassy, so I didn't know what to do about this, but I decided that really I had to report it to the foreign office. Although I knew it was a phony, I still did. Immediately they came back and said they would give us police protection, and they immediately stopped all Bulgarian access to the area. They said perhaps if we would not emphasize those rather controversial exhibits we had in the window, we wouldn't have threats like that. Well, obviously I'd fallen into a trap that I couldn't have avoided, so we went along for a few days, and we always changed those exhibits every two weeks, anyway. Then I wrote them a letter and said, "You can stop. We think we're safe now. You can stop the extra guards." [Laughter.] And they did. This was the kind of little game we were playing all the time.

Q: You were saying there were some other types of trouble you had?

TORBERT: Curiously enough, I had as much trouble with the Marine guards as anything else, because here were a lot of youngsters who were all bachelors and all living there, and they would occasionally take on a little too much. They were all wonderful guys, but we had a couple of automobile accidents, one thing and another, you know. Sadly, somebody was killed on one of them. Then we'd have a terrible time getting the Marines out.

Q: This does raise a point, particularly because we've had some scandals in Moscow, but something that has concerned many people in the Foreign Service, myself included, and that is

the use of very young Marines. No matter how well trained, they still are at the heavy drinking, heavy involvement in sex time, usually unmarried. Particularly in places where there's difficulty, we're not really going to use them as combat troops, and maybe somebody a little more mature than using young Marines as our security guards might be better.

TORBERT: The British usually have taken retired warrant officers or some junior officers and put them on this job. I don't know. The Marines have a lot of advantages. I'm certainly not against them. There was a drop-off in the quality at the end of my tour there, once we pulled troops out of Vietnam. Up to that time, going on embassy guard duty was considered sort of a reward for having served in Vietnam. We got people that had had that service and had done all right, survived, and they were a little more mature.

Then we suddenly started getting people who were maybe not just recruited, but were a year or two younger and with no really sobering experience under their belt. We had a little more trouble with them then. But it's a question in that kind of a post, to my mind, whether they aren't almost more trouble than they're worth, although God knows you've got to have - as long as they confine themselves to the girls in the Western community, the single girls, they served a useful purpose. [Laughter.]

Q: *This is a bit traditional.*

TORBERT: Yes. I'm not anti-Marine at all.

Q: *But we're talking about a serious problem of conduct, and young men are young men.*

TORBERT: Most of these incidents were accidents. They weren't wild, but they may have had a drink or two. They weren't roaring drunk or anything of that sort, but they were unwise.

Q: *This was your last post. You retired.*

TORBERT: This was my last post. I looked around. I was over 60 by that time, and Mac Toon, who was by that time ambassador in Yugoslavia said, "Hang on. You can get this post when I go to Moscow," and he didn't go to Moscow right away, anyway, but I didn't see much point in that. So I took one of those magic dates when you got a little extra kick.

Q: *This is during a period of inflation and you could retire.*

TORBERT: I had no idea it was going to happen that way, but I happily hit into a whole series of these inflation kickers. I did retire on the 31st of January 1973.

DAVID J. FISCHER
Political/Economic Officer
Sofia (1972-1974)

Born in Connecticut and raised in Minnesota, Mr. Fisher was educated at Brown University, the University of Vienna, Austria and Harvard Law School. He joined the Foreign Service in 1961. His various assignments abroad took him to Germany, Poland, Sofia, Kathmandu, Dar es Salaam as well as to the, where he served as US ambassador from 1982 to 1985. Assignments at the Department of State in Washington include those dealing with US relations with China, with Public Affairs and with Arms Control issues. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy and Robert Pasturing in 1998.

Q: In 1972 did you go straight to Bulgaria?

FISCHER: Yes, I think I had two or three months of language training and then went to Sofia.

Q: And you were in Bulgaria from when to when?

FISCHER: 1972 until 1974.

Q: What were you doing in Sofia?

FISCHER: I was the head of a two-man Political/Economic Section. This was one of the more boring assignments I had in the service. Firstly, Bulgaria was an extraordinarily closed system. Having come from Poland, it was appalling to see how totalitarian that country was. Bulgaria was a sleepy little backwater in the Balkans. The United States really had no interest there whatsoever, other than as a type of a listening post. Bulgaria was seen as the most pro-Soviet of all the Block countries. We had some specific interests. Narcotics and drug interdiction became a big thing for a while. We had a few, limited consular and commercial interests, but the political issues were frozen since 1947 when the communist regime took power, arrested most of the local staff of the Embassy and shot them.

The highlight of the tour for me was the birth of our daughter who was born prematurely in a Bulgarian hospital. That, in itself, was an interesting insight into the inefficiencies and inequities of the socialist system. She got pretty good, basic medical care but there were no amenities of any kind, including anesthesia during the birth. My wife and the baby were kept in the hospital for eight days or so, and that we were kind of on our own. The nearest American doctor was in Belgrade, but he couldn't come to Sofia because he was CIA. The diplomatic corps doctor supplied by the Bulgarian foreign ministry was understandably leery about treating Americans since his predecessor as the diplomatic doctor had been arrested and executed as an American spy two months before we arrived.

Our daughter developed pneumonia shortly after the birth, and the Ambassador - God bless him - went to the Foreign Ministry to request a USAF medical evacuation flight. The last American airplane to have overflown Bulgaria was in 1947, and it had been shot down.

But U.S.-Bulgarian relations had thawed a bit, and the Bulgarians used this opportunity to make a small gesture by allowing the flight to come to Sofia. They were astounded that the U.S. would divert such enormous resources for the life of one small baby. When the plane arrived at three in

the morning at Sofia airport, two Bulgarian doctors went with us to meet it. They saw equipment on that plane they could only dream about, and the Air Force doctors were very gracious in showing off their goodies.

Anyway, all's well that ends well, and she grew up a beautiful, healthy child.

Q: How heavy was the hand of the Bulgarian government on Bulgarian people out there?

FISCHER: Well I had come out of Eastern Europe. I had spent four years in Poland where virtually, although I was under surveillance all the time, I certainly had freedom of travel and freedom of association. The Poles were very anxious to talk to any Americans. I arrived in Sofia on a Friday afternoon. I got my Embassy apartment that was in a big high rise-building for diplomats and members of the Politburo, across from which there was a very beautiful park with a tennis court. So on Sunday afternoon I went over to the tennis court with a racket in my hand. I spoke Bulgarian, and I figured I'd pick up a game. There was a guy waiting on the bench. I asked him if he wanted to hit a few balls. He said sure. I felt in all fairness to him I had to tell him who I was. I said you have to understand, I'm an American, I'm with the Embassy. He said I don't care, you play tennis. I don't think we'd gone out and hit more than three volleys back and forth when two guys in trench coats came on the tennis court and picked up this Bulgarian by the elbows and took him off. I realized at that point, "Man, this isn't Poland." Their hand was extraordinarily heavy. This was a dictatorship of the most brutal fashion. It was a tragic, tragic country.

Q: Was there any interest Kremlinology, figuring out who's who in the Party kind of thing?

FISCHER: No. Todor Zhivkov was the head of the communist party and head of State. No question about who was running the show. No one else really mattered much. The Minister of Foreign Trade was a man by the name of Andrei Lukanov who became President when the communist system began to crack in 1989 or 1990. But there certainly were few, if any, opportunities for U.S. influence.

Q: Who was the Ambassador and DCM?

FISCHER: The DCM was a marvelous woman named Helene Batjer. I had worked with Helene at INR so we were good friends. Helene was one of the few women who had worked herself up the ranks. In fact, she had served in Sofia in 1946 as a code clerk. There was no question she was destined to Ambassadorial rank, but she died of cancer shortly after her assignment in Sofia.

My first Ambassador was a guy, who was a wonderful Ambassador, by the name Telly Torbert. He saw the assignment for what it was, an old backwater but he had that Ambassadorial title. And the second Ambassador was Martin Hertz. I remember Hertz came and I had less than four months with him. Under the rules of the Foreign Service in those days, you had to serve with someone for at least one hundred twenty-eight days before they could write an efficiency report. Hertz had a reputation of being a petty tyrant. He was something of an expert of Iran and had served as DCM in Tehran. This was the only instance in the Foreign Service when I got letters of commiseration, warning me about Hertz. So I think in that first meeting, I walked in his office

and said, "Mr. Ambassador, as you know, I'm scheduled to leave here in one hundred and ten days, and therefore despite your reputation as being a son-of-a-bitch, you can't write me a bad OER. Therefore, I'm going to give you the straight, unvarnished truth as best I know it. No BS." He thought this was the funniest thing he'd ever heard, and we became fast friends. He went all out to get the personnel system to allow me to stay on as the new DCM. But he remained one of my rabbis in the service and always looked out for me, even though we never served together again.

He was renowned. He could take dictation better than anyone else. He could type fast. He was sort of scary.

Q: Did you travel around a lot?

FISCHER: You could travel, but of course there were very fierce travel restrictions set up in a way that made it very difficult. The Embassy had a dacha, a small house in the mountains outside Sofia. We had a fabulous house in the woods about an hour and a half from Sofia in ski resort called Borovets. It was a great place to get away and was used on a rotational basis by embassy families. I must say that both Ambassadors were egalitarian and made sure that everyone, regardless of rank, had a chance to use the dacha.

The food situation was terrible in Bulgaria. We really had no fruits and vegetables, no meat. You couldn't buy anything except moldy cabbage. There were diplomatic stores but they were very limited. Again, the Bulgarians from time to time would deny us access to those stores. So we had an arrangement whereby Embassy officers would drive to northern Greece to Salonika every weekend on a rotational basis. The Embassy would pay your gas expenses and you'd load up the back of your car with fruits and vegetables, which were then given out in the Embassy.

Q: Did you get over to Yugoslavia much?

FISCHER: Very little. The road between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, despite it being the main truck route from southeastern to western Europe was unbelievably bad. It was a slightly improved dirt track which wended its way through the Pirot mountains, and on a rainy night it could get really very frightening. The nearest big city was Nis in Yugoslavia, and we all drove over there once or twice a year when we got desperate. But Nis, which by the way was heavily bombed in the Kosovo war, wasn't exactly Paris or London. But they did have things like plastic toys for the kids.

Q: How about cultural life?

FISCHER: In the entire time I was in Bulgaria, I think I had probably had two Bulgarians to my house. Both of them fairly senior people and cleared by the secret police. I got to know a couple of actors in Bulgarian theater but again the risk for them of anyone associated with the American Embassy was so high. I became friends with a doctor. And we tried to see each other on a personal private basis from time to time but that became impossible. The risk was far too high. We were constantly under secret police surveillance, and anyone we contacted, no matter how innocently, would be arrested and interrogated. So that was one of the few Foreign Service

postings where I really didn't know anyone other than the local employees in the Embassy all of whom were secret police types.

Q: David, were there any attempts on the part of the secret police to entrap you or was this just not what they were interested in?

FISCHER: No. In Poland, as I think I said earlier, we had a relationship with a surveillance team. The Polish secret police were human beings. The first weekend my wife and I were in Sofia, there's a large mountain called Vitosha outside Sofia which is snow covered much of the year, and although this was probably September or October of the year we decided on ascending - we'd go up and climb around. So I pulled into the parking lot, and my surveillance team pulled in next to us, my wife and I, in climbing boots and everything else. I turned to them, and I said in Bulgarian, "look guys, we're going to climb up there in the snow. We'll wait here if you want, while you go and rent some boots." They looked at me and said, "are you crazy, we don't know who you are." So two hours later, as my wife and I are trudging through the snow, here are these two guys behind us, ruining their dress shoes. It was a pretty heavy-handed system.

One of the problems was my wife went there, as I said, pregnant. There was in those days in Bulgaria, the Bureau for Diplomatic Services which was the agency through which all Embassies had to operate to get help and services. They had a doctor for the diplomatic corps. Two months prior to our arrival, he had been taken and arrested as a CIA agent and shot. The Embassy Doctor, the guy from the State Department who normally would have provided medical services to us, was the regional medical officer in Belgrade, Yugoslavia. We arrived in Bulgaria, and the doctor in Belgrade said, "you're on your own because I can't come into Bulgaria." The newly appointed Bulgarian diplomatic doctor for obvious reasons was very reluctant to treat any Americans. We were pretty much on our own. When my wife gave birth in Sofia, we became friends with a couple of Bulgarian doctors who were very helpful when my daughter was born prematurely. In the Soviet system of medicine, natal care was that mothers were kept in a hospital for 10 days. Of course, my wife was chaffing at the bit, I mean this was an awful situation. The hospital was the worst imaginable, and she wanted to get out. So at the end of eight days, I took my wife and daughter out of the hospital, against medical advice and about two weeks later, my daughter developed pneumonia. We were really caught in a jam. We had, in essence, taken her out against medical advice, and the Bulgarian doctor, the diplomatic doctor, was less than willing to see us on a regular basis, but he really put his life on the line for us. He came and visited us twice a day, did all sorts of things. We were all worried that she wasn't going to make it.

I asked for a medical evacuation flight out of Wiesbaden, Germany. You have to understand that the last American military flight into Bulgaria had been in 1947 when a U.S. Air Force plane had been shot down. The idea of asking for a military jet aircraft to land in Sofia airport to pick up a four-week old American baby was absolutely out of the question. I learned that the request went all the way up to Todor Zhivkov who was head of the Communist party. I think partly because of my friendship with some people in the Foreign Ministry and the relationship we had developed with the Bulgarian doctor, that they agreed. So at three o'clock in the morning in early December 1972, an air force jet arrived. We had been taken to the airfield by the Bulgarian doctor and a staff of doctors in an ambulance. I will never forget the look on their faces when this aircraft

opened up. I don't know if you know how medical evacuation...

Q: I have to say my wife was air evacuated twice from Yugoslavia.

FISCHER: Then, as you know, they have a team of doctors and nurses, there was a pressurized incubation system on board. These doctors, these Bulgarians, as they looked at this equipment, there was stuff on the airplane they'd only read about. The idea that the U.S. government would send this enormous plane to save the life of one child was unheard of. That was quite an experience. Anyway she got medevaced, was cured and fine and came back to Bulgaria.

Bulgaria was an interesting assignment in the sense that it was a beautiful country. I did travel around. One of things we developed there was close cooperation with the Bulgarians on narcotics trafficking. We brought out a team of U.S. customs officials to help them train the Bulgarian customs people. As a result of that I got to travel around the country more than I might have otherwise.

Q: What was in it for the Bulgarians to try and halt this international traffic?

FISCHER: Well, at the time we thought we had a joint interest in reducing narcotics, especially morphine base and heroin. We later learned that they realized they could intercept the narcotics, keep it and sell it themselves. But at the time, I think they wanted to look moral, they wanted to be on the right side of the angels, and they had no interest that the drugs were crossing their country.

Again, an anecdote. We used to pass intelligence to the Bulgarians, which was unique in those Cold War days. This was the first arrangement we ever had between law enforcement agencies in Eastern Europe. The head of the Bulgarian customs service was a very right and honorable gentleman, an old cop. He was straight. We used to pass him intelligence we would get. For example, I'd get a telegram from the DEA in Frankfurt, reporting that we had intelligence that a certain truck or car, such-and-such a license plate would be crossing the Bulgarian border. So we gave them intelligence one day, and they stopped a Mercedes Benz. We had told them there were thirty kilograms of heroin in this vehicle. They pulled it apart and only found fifteen kilograms. We figured our intelligence had been faulty. Well, the Bulgarians did what all law enforcement agencies do: at the end of six or twelve months they'd auction off seized property, including the car they had caught as a result of our tip. I was sitting in my office one day, and I got a call from the auctioneer. He said, you know that Mercedes you told us about a couple of months ago? There are two guys down here who are bidding for it, two Turks, and they are bidding out of sight for that car. I said, stop the auction. Clearly, you only found fifteen kilograms of heroine and there are still fifteen kilograms somewhere in that car! And that's precisely what they did. They arrested the two guys who were bidding and ripped the car apart even further and found fifteen kilograms more of heroin.

I think the Bulgarians in those days, I don't know, subsequently we've learned there was a Bulgarian outfit that was selling arms, and selling narcotics that they had interdicted. I'd like to think that in those days, '72, '73, '74 they were on the up and up and were stopping that stuff.

Q: How about, were you keeping an eye on the Turkish minority and relations?

FISCHER: That was a big issue there. Again, I guess there was no real crackdown but there were certainly whole areas of the country where the Turkish minority lived that we were not allowed to travel in. Minority rights of both the Turkish minority and gypsies were political issues in those days. But, human rights did not loom large in U.S.-Bulgarian relations, partly because human rights had not become a legitimate subject of diplomatic discourse before 1975 or 1976. We might use them once in a while to beat up the Bulgars, but no one really gave a damn about what happened to the Turks. Except the Turkish Embassy, of course, which would lodge the odd protest now and again.

Q: Well Nis was also nearby, a center of Gypsy culture...

FISCHER: But again, this was not very high on American radar scopes. The Turks had a very active Embassy there, and it was their major task looking out how to protect the Turkish minorities. I always found the gypsy culture a fascinating one. I had run across gypsies when I was serving in Poland, but they were much more numerous in Bulgaria. The Bulgars had tried to end their nomadic life by building ghettos for them on the outskirts of Plovdiv. But, I remember that they were a total failure. The Bulgarians ended up having to build a huge wooden fence to screen off the ghetto from the main road.

Q: Did you ever get involved or in arguments or looking at what is the Bulgarian language and what's being spoken in Macedonia?

FISCHER: Ah, the famous issue of what constitutes Macedonian!

Q: Was Macedonian a Bulgarian language?

FISCHER: Wars have been fought over this issue. In those days the Bulgarian position, of course, they recognized Yugoslavia, they had diplomatic relations, but every Bulgarian believed in their heart of hearts that the Yugoslav province of Macedonia was really Bulgarian. Macedonians were, on the one hand, grateful for what the Bulgarians had done in the 19th century to overthrow the Ottoman Empire. But, they also saw themselves as ethnically separate from Bulgaria and claimed that Macedonian was a unique language. All I know is that if you spoke Bulgarian you certainly could get by in Skopje and other areas of Yugoslav Macedonia.

Q: Of course, the Greeks felt the same way.

FISCHER: Yes. I remember once going into a church in Southern Bulgaria, and it was a monastery. There was an old woman, maybe eighty years old, who was a sort of vestry woman, she swept the place. I fell to talking to her. She, it turns out, had been a partisan in the civil wars in Bulgaria between Greece and Bulgaria in the period right after WWI. I said to her, "how did you take care of the Greeks who were in your village?" She mimicked, pantomimed, picking up a hand grenade in her hand, pulling a pin and rolling it down the aisle. This is an eighty-year old religious woman. And of course looking at the Balkan wars in the 1990s we forget what a powder keg were the Balkans before and after WWI. There were certainly Bulgarians I knew

who believed they had a right to the port of Salonika in Greece.

Q: Interesting cross currents in that area. Well, is there anything else, any stories?

FISCHER: No I don't think so. No, as I say it was a bit of a tabula rasa in terms of the assignment. My wife and I both spoke Bulgarian which was kind of unusual in that post. The Bulgarians were strange in that regard. No matter how badly one spoke Bulgarian (and mine was pretty bad), they always assumed you were Bulgarian, albeit slow and half-witted. I don't think they could conceive of a foreigner who spoke their language. Perhaps it was the fact that there were so many Turks who spoke little or no Bulgarian. And you asked what we did. We did attend the opera; theater, such as it was. I guess the best way to sum up Bulgaria in terms of Bulgarian history; the Bulgarians created a king. They created a monarchy. It was indeed related to the Mountbatten family of Great Britain. But at some point, Bulgaria's first monarch, whose name now escapes me, had taken the thrown of this God-forsaken, backwater Balkan state in 1883 I think. He abdicated his throne, and he ran off with a French bicyclist who was performing in the circus. I always thought he made the right choice.

The Bulgarian communist party was one of the more corrupt regimes in eastern Europe. Todor Zhivkov was a big, hulking peasant type who ruled by fiat. The Bulgarians, however, genuinely had cultural and historical ties with Russia which made them the most obedient and subservient of the Warsaw Pact. In 1947 they had proposed becoming a republic of the USSR, an offer even Stalin refused. In Poland one was hard pressed to find anyone who would speak kindly of the Soviet Union. Bulgarians, even those opposed to the regime (and they were hard to find) tended to see the Russians as allies. Bulgaria also differed from Poland in that there was a sizeable Jewish community that had been protected during the war. The King of Bulgaria was the only Axis leader who refused Hitler's orders to transport all Jews to concentration camps. And it was not only that the Jews had survived. They used their Jewish names with pride. In the rest of Eastern Europe, those that had survived sought to assimilate or hide their origins.

HARVEY FELDMAN
Deputy Chief of Mission
Sofia (1975-1977)

Harvey Feldman was born in New York City in 1931 and educated at the University of Chicago. He entered the Foreign Service in 1954. His career included posts in Hong Kong, Tokyo, Nagoya, Taipei and Sofia and he was named ambassador to Papua New Guinea. He was interviewed by Edward Dillery in 1999.

Q: After Taiwan, where were you assigned?

FELDMAN: I was assigned to Bulgaria. One day, I got a telephone call in Taipei from Personnel asking me whether I wanted to be "GLOPed" to Bulgaria. You may remember that when Kissinger became secretary of state, he decided that the Foreign Service had become too inbred

and over-specialized and instructed his under-secretary for management, Larry Eagleburger, to start a “global outlook program” (“GLOP”). That is to say, Kissinger did not want officers to spend all of their time in one world region; he wanted “out of area” tours.

By this time, I had been assigned exclusively to the Far East - Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan for almost 20 years. So I was asked whether I wanted to go to Bulgaria for my “out of area” assignment. Martin Hertz was then our ambassador in Bulgaria; I had worked for him in IO, as I mentioned. He requested that I be assigned to Sofia as his DCM. That served the purpose of giving me a “global” outlook while at the same time allowing me to become a DCM. I was delighted under those circumstances to go to Bulgaria.

In January 1975, I was transferred from Taipei to Sofia - the assignment to be effective after six months of Bulgarian language training in Washington. I reported to Washington and sent a telegram to Laurie, whom I was planning to marry. I asked her to come to join me in the language class. It was a unique marriage proposal, but she came to Washington and we started language training together.

We had an absolutely awful teacher who knew nothing about language teaching. But both Laurie and I had been through language training - she had studied Chinese at Cornell University and I both Chinese and Japanese. So both of us knew how one learns a foreign language; we sort of taught our instructor how to teach us. Laurie has a great ear for languages; she picked it up very quickly.

So six months later, Laurie and I - a happily married couple - landed in Sofia. It was an interesting transition from twenty years in East Asia to Eastern Europe. Interestingly enough, I found myself completely at home. I was probably a 2 plus in speaking and reading; Laurie was probably close to a 3/3. Early on, Laurie found herself seated next to the Bulgarian Chief of Protocol, Dr. Zhibrov, at some official dinner. He had just returned from a tour as ambassador in India. He spoke excellent English. During their conversation, he asked my wife what she intended to do during her time in Bulgaria. She told him that she would really like to study at the University of Sofia, but she thought that the government would not permit it. This was 1975 when Bulgaria was one of the most Stalinist states in Eastern Europe. The country was filled with billboards saying “Eternal Friendship between the USSR and Bulgaria.” In fact, the USSR was just called the “Union” as some referred to the U.S. as the “States.” The chief of protocol showed some surprise and said that if she could pass the entrance exam, of course she could be admitted to the university.

So Laurie, in her inimitable way, asked where she could take the entrance exam. He told her that he would arrange it for her. I should note that Dr Zhibrov - who actually was a medical doctor - was married to a film director. When he was ambassador in New Delhi, she was not allowed to work and took her frustrations out on him. So he was sensitive to these feminist issues.

A week went by and we didn’t hear anything; two weeks went by and we didn’t hear anything. Finally, I got the ambassador’s permission - he thought the whole process amusing - to send an informal query to the Foreign Ministry, quoting Zhibrov and asking where Mrs. Feldman might go to take her entrance exam to “Universitat Kliment Ohridski: St. Clement of Ohrid” (a lake in

what is now Macedonia) was a saint and one of the great cultural saints of mediaeval Bulgaria; the University was named after him. In due course, we received a reply suggesting that if Mrs. Feldman would present herself at the University on a certain date and time, she could be administered the entrance examination. So Laurie did that and she creamed the exam; it was no problem. She was a whiz at languages; she had to take the exam in Bulgarian, which didn't throw Laurie at all; she expected that. She essentially took the exam that is normally given to Bulgarian high school graduates. So she had no problem with that.

So the Bulgarians, who might have surprised by Laurie's proficiency, had no choice except to let her into University. It was clear after about six months that she was way beyond the undergraduate level; she was allowed to work for a degree called "Kandidat," which is somewhere between a U.S. MA and a Ph.D. - pretty close to the latter. She had to take this degree in Bulgarian history - that was the only thing the authorities would allow. I had persuaded Laurie to find additional data on the case of Ellen Stone, who had been an American missionary in the early 1900s. She worked in what is now southern Bulgaria and in Macedonia, the former Yugoslav republic, which was then part of the Ottoman empire. American missionaries had only recently been admitted to Bulgaria, but were under strict prohibition to preach to Muslims. They could only preach to Christians. So the missionaries, when they entered a village, immediately took a religious census to insure that they would not preach to the Muslims. Interestingly enough, these censuses still exist and are kept at American Farm School, which is just outside Thessaloniki in northern Greece. These censuses show dramatically that the overwhelming majority of this area counted themselves as members of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.

This was very significant and the Bulgarians loved it when Laurie announced her findings. That was because the Serbs had been trying to establish that the Macedonians weren't ethnic Bulgarians. At the embassy, one of the better locals, after learning that Laurie was a candidate for this advanced degree, told Laurie that she knew where the unpublished diary of one of the leaders of the gang that kidnapped Ellen Stone in 1901, could be found. Ellen Stone, while traveling in that part of the Ottoman Empire had been kidnapped by what today would be known as "Freedom Fighters." These were Bulgarians who were fighting against the Turks. Bulgaria had been freed from the Ottoman empire as result of the Russo-Turkish war of 1876-77. But what was freed was a truncated version compared to the present. For example, the southern part of today's Bulgaria was not part of the new state of 1877; that remained part of the Ottoman empire.

So these "freedom fighters" (or "brigands," as the Turks called them), led by Yanni Sandanski, a great legend and hero, were fighting to liberate that part which remained in the Ottoman empire, so that they could join Bulgaria. They had a co-leader, Christo Chernopayef. As I said, they kidnapped Ellen Stone and held her for ransom; they would have used the proceeds for arm purchases. The mores of the time dictated that they could not kidnap a sole woman; so they took along one of her Bible students, Katarina Tsilka. Unbeknownst to the kidnappers, Tsilka, who was married to an Albanian - also a Bible student - was three months pregnant. The kidnappers fled from place to place in the mountains with these women, just one step ahead of the Turkish police.

The diaries that our embassy employee found were those of Christo Chernopayef, which had

never been published. They contained lots of new material about the kidnaping and the subsequent drama. They included a description of the birth of Tsilka's baby, up in the high mountains, while the ransom negotiations were going on. There is a description of a charming scene when each of these mustachioed brigands, with their cross bands of cartridges, gave the new baby whatever they had available. One gave his tobacco pouch, one gave a knife, another his spare pair of shoes. It was a very touching human interest story.

I should mention that the baby, after her rough start, grew up and married the American consul in Tirana. That woman's daughter was still living in Miami a couple of years ago. We were in contact with her.

Laurie wrote up this piece of history. It was published by the "The Fatherland Front Press." Laurie became a minor celebrity in Bulgaria.

As I said, Laurie started at the University. As a student, the Bulgarians could not prevent her from contact with her fellow students and faculty members. This was a contact which in little Stalinist Bulgaria, was denied to almost every diplomat, including the Soviets and other Eastern block representatives. But we had students and professors in and out of our house all the time. So shortly, we had a range of contacts in Bulgaria which was the envy of all other diplomats. In addition, I became very friendly with the chief of security for the Foreign Ministry, Georgi Darnyanov. That started because our embassy in Sofia was on one of the major boulevards in the center of the city - Boulevard Stamboliski. The USIS Cultural Center was also right there, as part of the embassy.

That Center was not used very much. The Bulgarian police stood in front, so that anyone who entered the Center was recorded - probably photographed from across the street. As the newly arrived DCM (all newly arrived try to sweep up the "mess" left by their predecessors), I decided that we should do something more with the Cultural Center which was moribund. The embassy was on the U.S. military film circuit which delivered 16 mm films to various U.S. establishments from Germany. So we used to get the American movies, fairly recent ones at that, which we used for our own entertainment. I suggested that we should have showings in the Cultural Center, inviting some Bulgarians to join us.

I think we started with Elia Kazan's "America, America," but I am not positive about that. We sent out circulars inviting selected Bulgarians to come to see the movie on a Friday night. That resulted in an invitation from the Foreign Office's chief of security - the equivalent of a major in the Bulgarian secret service - to come to see him, which I did. He informed me that we were doing a terrible thing because all sorts of "hooligans" and other suspects would come to the Cultural Center and make disturbances; that was very bad. He asked that we cancel our plans.

It seemed to me that this was a veiled warning that if we proceeded we could expect "hooligans" and other provocations; so I came to the conclusion that this was probably not a wise move. I said that we would cancel the event. The chief of security breathed a great sigh of relief because he obviously had looked upon his task as a tough assignment. It did give me the opportunity to have a bit of conversation with him. He said that the opportunities to see such films were rare. I told him that by sheer accident, I did have a film which I was going to show at my residence that

week-end - it was a cowboy film with John Wayne. He looked eager and finally agreed to come. That was the beginning of a beautiful and close friendship. We were so close that the two families that once Georgi's wife became really ill and was taken to the hospital, Laurie went to their house and cooked meals for Georgi and his two children.

We traveled together. There were parts of Bulgaria that were closed to all foreign diplomats. There are other parts that were closed only to Western diplomats. I had a humongous Chevrolet - that was my official car. I think it was originally built for an American police force; so it was not a standard Chevrolet. It was gorgeous. Georgi loved to ride in that Chevrolet. So on some weekends, he would ask me whether I was free to travel to some interesting places in the "Zabrenena zona" (that was the zone that was closed to all diplomats, even the Soviets). We drove here and there, being watched by police who were mystified by what a car with diplomatic plates was doing in this restricted area. Georgi would hold his ID card out of the window and the police would salute and we would proceed. It was quite amazing.

On some of those weekends, Georgi said that he could not join me, but he would send me to meet some of his friends - many of them high party functionaries living in the provinces. It was a very useful friendship, which combined with Laurie's contacts, made our tour a thoroughly delightful experience. I reached the point where I decided that in fact I had wasted twenty years of my life in East Asia; I could have served that time in Eastern Europe; it was much more fun.

I learned that Bulgaria was one of the most intensively pro-American countries I had ever seen. At that time, for about thirty years, the government had been telling its people that America was the antithesis of everything Bulgaria stood for. But people always seemed to say that they wanted to be more like Americans. We could travel anywhere and as soon as people found out that we were Americans, they became very hospitable; there was nothing they wouldn't do for us. Once we were staying at the dacha of a friend, who was a travel writer. He was unique among Bulgarian travel writers because he had been to both the North and South Poles. He was probably the only member of the Bulgarian communist party with an autographed photograph of Barry Goldwater. This happened because while he was in the South Pole, staying at the Soviet station there, Goldwater visited the facility. Of course, that meant that all of the people at the Soviet station were invited to visit the American station at McMurdo Sound. So my friend got this autographed picture.

We were at this dacha. On a Sunday morning, my host discovered that he was out of eggs. We all got into his car to go to the village to buy some eggs. When we reached the town, we found that there was a wedding in progress. That required my friend to introduce Laurie and me to the bride and groom. Once they found out that we were Americans we were requested to join the happy couple and sit with the wedding party at the table of honor. Four or five hours later, we managed to push ourselves away from the festivities. That is just one illustration of how an American was received in Bulgaria.

Q: Did you ever get movies to be shown at the Cultural Center?

FELDMAN: No. What we did instead was to show the movies at home and invite Bulgarians to watch them there. That seemed acceptable to the authorities - perhaps because we often had the

Foreign Office security chief there. We never made it a public spectacle, which made it easier for the authorities to swallow.

Q: What was the embassy like in Sofia?

FELDMAN: The embassy was small. It was a very confining existence for most of the staff. Those who suffered the most were probably the Marine Guards - young men of 19 or 20 who were instructed not to travel around, not to "fraternize" - no contact with Bulgarians. So there was a somewhat incestuous life among the foreign staffs. Since these fellows were Marines, diplomats didn't have much to do with them. That left them with a very small community of foreign secretaries and clerks, which were rather few. So the Marines would periodically get into trouble. One of my assignments as DCM was to get them out of trouble. I remember once I was asked to call the Austrian chancery; I was confronted by a very irate ambassador who informed me that his secretary had been assaulted by an American secretary in the Chancery building. The Marines lived on the top floor of the Chancery building. Apparently, one of the Marines was having an affair simultaneously with an American secretary and an Austrian secretary; the two confronted each other on the stairway of the American chancery where the American took a swing at the Austrian.

In fact, we had another problem when it turned out that the wife of the gunnery sergeant was having an affair with another Marine. That was tough to handle.

The embassy functioned reasonably well. It was a collection of some odd-balls. The senior military attaché was a "geographic bachelor" - his wife and family had stayed in the States. When he formed an attachment with one of the secretaries in our embassy, I heaved a great sigh of relief because that kept him out of trouble. That was fine.

Later, we had a real problem with a USIS secretary who used to make obscene phone calls. This was a woman in her early 50s who used to phone the Marines describing in great detail the various intimate things she would like them to do to her and what she might do to them. We had to ship her home.

One day, my secretary came to me to inform me that she was having an affair with a Bulgarian engineer. It seemed that in her previous post, Addis Ababa. She belonged to a bridge circle which included that Bulgarian. Somehow, after her transfer to Sofia as the DCM's secretary, the engineer showed up one day - what a surprise!!!. One thing led to another and an affair was begun. She had the brains and the guts to tell me about it before things really got out of hand. He had never had asked her for documents, but she was afraid that that day might soon come, which led to her confession.

So we had lots of internal embassy problems. Externally, we had no real problem with the Bulgarian government. We were on the opposites sides of the ideological divide; they were strong members of the Warsaw Pact, but we got along alright.

All the NATO countries had representation in Sofia. So a sort of NATO group had sprung up with a rotating chairman on a monthly basis. They met at the chair's residence. In addition, the

Indians and the Pakistanis had missions; the Chinese were there, but we never saw them. I had most contacts with the Brazilians, the Pakistanis, the Italians, the British and the Dutch only because I had developed some personal relationships with them. The foreign circle was relatively closed. We never saw much of the Soviets or of any of the other Warsaw Pact members. Once, at a reception, I remember getting into a conversation with a gentleman who turned out to be the Cuban ambassador. When he found out that I was an American official, he turned on his heels and walked away. Maybe I should not have talked to him in the first place, but the Department rules were cockamamory and certainly to be ignored.

During one of my periods as chargé d'affaires, the Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, came to Bulgaria. It was my duty to escort him on his call on the President of Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov, known familiarly as Bai Tosho, a nickname for Todor, with the Turkish honorific - bay. Zhivkov played the role of a wily peasant, ala Khrushchev, with zest; in fact he was a very sharp and shrewd guy. In fact, he was the only person still alive who had attended Stalin's 75th birthday party and those of all of his successors up to Gorbachev. He was a real survivor. He knew when to tighten the screws and when to loosen them. He also was rather funny. So I walked in with Butz and were seated; you may recall that Butz himself was somewhat of a joker - he had to resign as secretary of agriculture because of a rather crude joke. Butz started the conversation with some very serious remarks about how Bulgaria and the United States - two countries with an agricultural surplus - had the duty to feed the rest of the world. Zhivkov listened, but his eyes were glazing over. Finally, he interrupted and said, "Mr. Minister, may I interrupt you?" When Butz nodded agreement, Zhivkov added, "I have just returned from the 25th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. I heard a very amusing joke there, which I would like to tell you. It goes like this: how long will communism survive?" Butz looked at me; I shrugged my shoulders. He said that he didn't know. Zhivkov slapped his leg and said: "As long as America sells grain!" I might mention that today, April 23, 1999, I am going to have lunch with the current president of Bulgaria, Peter Stoyanov. I will tell him that he is the second president with whom I have lunched. I could go on about Zhivkov and his daughter, Ludmilla, for a long time. She was a rather strikingly attractive, but strange woman. She had spent a fair amount of time in India and was a devout student of various kinds of Indian mysticisms. She opened a yoga institute in Bulgaria.

I also learned from her, while sitting next to her at various dinners, that she was a fervent believer in the lost continent of Atlantis - and other esoterica. The Zhivkovs were a strange but interesting family. Zhivkov survived the transition from Bulgarian communism to whatever followed - not quite democracy, not quite capitalism, but it certainly not communism or socialism. Ludmilla by this point was dead; she had died officially from a heart attack, but the Bulgarians generally believed that she was assassinated at the order of the USSR leadership. Ludmilla, in addition to her Shirley McLain-like new age weirdness, was a fervent Bulgarian nationalist. She was the Minister of Culture for a while; during her tour, she propagandized and propagated a very strong reverence for ancient Bulgarian culture. Many believed that her attitude offended the Soviet Union and she was actually poisoned.

After Zhivkov was kicked out of office, he went to live with his grand-daughter - his only grandchild. He died just a couple of years ago - 1996 or 1997 - in late eighties or early nineties. He had begun his career as a printer and later became an official of the printers' union. Then,

according to the communist hagiography, he became an underground fighter during WWII - I don't know whether that is a fact.

I should also mention that Bulgaria, although an ally of Germany in WWII, never exported any of its Jewish population. At the end of WWII, Bulgaria had a greater Jewish population than it had at the beginning of the war. By now, most of them have left; after the war, they were permitted by the Bulgarian government to emigrate to Israel. Most of them took advantage of this opportunity. At least a couple of years ago, there were Bulgarian daily newspapers in Israel. The wife of Yitzhak Shamir, the former prime minister, was Bulgarian. There are a number of very prominent Bulgarian-born or descendants in universities and in politics in Israel.

Let me tell you a bit about how the Bulgarians managed to save the Jews. Toward the end of 1943, the Germans began to put enormous pressure on the Bulgarian government to export the Bulgarian Jews to concentration camps in Poland and other places. Basically, the Bulgarians said that they would work on it and managed to fumble enough not to get anything done. There is a common belief in Bulgaria that King Boris died in a plane crash on his return to Sofia in 1944, but that in fact, he died up in the air when his oxygen was cut off. The Royalists, who still have a party in Bulgaria, and many others believe that the King, in a conversation with Hitler, absolutely refused to permit the export of Bulgarian Jews.

There is a museum in Sofia called "The Museum on the Salvation of Bulgarian Jews." There have been books written about this bit of history, which is quite remarkable. At Yad Vashem in Jerusalem there are a number of remembrances of the policy of the Bulgarian government in protecting its Jewish citizens. This is a story that is not often heard. But also have to say, to be even handed, that this policy only held for Bulgarian Jews. During WWII, Bulgarian troops occupied part of Yugoslavia and there Jews were sent to concentration camps.

Q: Tell us a little more about what else you did in Bulgaria.

FELDMAN: I did a lot of traveling. One time, I went to northern Bulgaria to spend a week-end with a local party first secretary from that particular region - another visit arranged by my friend Georgi. As I was driven around by this official in his official Volga, we passed a village where all the houses were painted blue. This was very strange because Bulgarian houses were always painted white. I asked why these houses were blue. The response was: "Gypsies." I asked whether we could stop and take a look; I had never seen a Gypsy village. The official tried to discourage me, but I persisted. So we stopped and walked through the village on unpaved and muddy roads; the houses were decrepit. Children were running around with bare feet and running noses - a typical Third World scene. I asked my host why the conditions were so poor. He told me that they liked to live this way. I then asked what schools the children attended; they had their own schools, which they preferred - said my host. The responses from my host reminded me very much of what a local official might have said if we had been traveling through the backwaters of Mississippi observing the black Americans living there. The official slogan of Bulgaria at the time was "all for humanity." But what I saw in the Gypsy village certainly departed from that ideal. In fact, Bulgarians, like most nationalities, I guess, fear and despise gypsies.

Q: Did we do anything with Bulgaria during this period?

FELDMAN: Not really. We were just there. Our military attaches would be running up and down the roads of Bulgaria, looking for military convoys. They would write down the license numbers of the vehicles - if they could get close enough - and which way the convoys were headed. They would attempt to photograph airfields, railroad crossings and anything else they considered of "vital" importance.

Occasionally, we had discussions with the Bulgarians about human rights cases. I spent a lot of time on family reunification cases. Many Bulgarians had relatives in the States; a lot had lived in the U.S. and had earned pensions while working there. In their old age, they returned to Bulgaria. So we had a lot of Social Security and Railroad Retirement cases; people living off these retirement benefits in Bulgaria.

Once, Laurie and I were hiking in the mountains of southern Bulgaria, we came across an old shepherd; he stopped us and asked whether we were Americans. When he found out, he switched to English and told us that he had worked for the Ford Company at River Rouge during WWII, building tanks. He retired soon after the end of the war and came to live in Bulgaria, tending sheep.

Q: This was your first exposure to being a DCM and a chargé. Any thoughts about that experience?

FELDMAN: The role of the DCM, as all people who have served as such know, is the worst job in the Foreign Service. You are responsible for everything but you have absolutely no authority for anything. Martin Hertz, the ambassador, was not an easy person to get along with. I was one of the few people who did, at least to any appreciable extent. Even I was driven to distraction from time to time, if not by Martin, then by his wife Elizabeth, who was of an Austrian old and proud family - a fact that she would never anyone forget.

Martin would at times come up with some scheme which I regarded as purely make-work. He would always begin such a conversation with his pet phrase: "On the principle that the ambassador does nothing, but makes plans and strategies for his DCM to implement, I would like to..." It used to drive me absolutely crazy because most of his ideas were truly make-work and not worth any time or effort. Once Martin received an intelligence tip through our station chief from another intelligence service; the tip was that the Bulgarians had somehow placed not just a listening device - we assumed that they were everywhere - but a camera in the wall of his office which covered everything that went on in his office 24 hours per day. Why Martin would be disturbed by this, I never figured out; as far as I know, he didn't do anything strange or weird. But this rumor really bothered him. So I was instructed to do something about it.

One night, our security officer, the station chief and I got up at 2 o'clock in the morning and we drove to the chancery. There we picked up some sledge hammers which we had carefully secreted the afternoon before. We attacked the wall where the camera was allegedly lodged. We didn't find any camera, but we did see a wire, which we immediately cut - and the embassy's telex went dead. After we repaired the wire, we had to get a mason in to close the wall, being

watched very carefully by the security officer. Martin was not entirely satisfied with our efforts, but recognized that there wasn't much he could do about it.

Q: How about the role of the chargé? Was it fun?

FELDMAN: Oh, yes. I looked forward to being chargé. I enjoyed Bulgaria. I had a great time; Laurie had even a better time. Of all of my Foreign Service posts - except my first tour in Hong Kong - this is the one I liked the most. We were very sad when we had to leave. Laurie had gotten her "Kandidat" degree - at Kliment Ohridski, after finishing her dissertation on Ellen Stone. We were having a wonderful time and I would have cheerfully stayed. Martin had left and I was the charge' for about three months. At stage, unfortunately, I was informed that I would be transferred back to Washington - "position not yet decided." I was told that a new DCM would arrive in about two weeks. That was too bad, but that is the service.

Q: What about your children? What happened to them while you were in Sofia?

FELDMAN: At this stage, Ross Christopher was already in his early twenties and Peter was in boarding school. So neither of children lived with us and, in fact, they never visited Bulgaria.

I should end this chapter in my career by noting that after 20 years working on Chinese affairs, I had numerous Chinese acquaintances, but no real friends. After two just two years in Bulgaria, we had scores of Bulgarian friends. Those that are still living are still friends today. In that connection, I might complete the story of Danyanov. He had been the first of his peasant family to go to school. He always thanked the Bulgarian Communist Party for that. He liked America and Americans, but he loved the Soviet Union and the Bulgarian Communist Party. What he wanted more than anything else was to be an ambassador. He spoke French and what he really wanted was to be Bulgarian ambassador to Haiti so that he could be in the Western Hemisphere. After I left Bulgaria, I used to correspond with Georgi. It turned out that he did become an ambassador, but it was to Laos - a small embassy of three or four people. He absolutely hated it. He also became seriously ill. Unbeknownst to him, he had diabetes and it got very bad while he was in Laos. He was mis-diagnosed by the doctor at the Soviet Embassy. The end result was that his left leg had to be imputed below the knee. The operation took place in a Thai hospital in Bangkok. The American Ambassador in Laos arranged for Georgi to have a prosthesis and physical therapy at an American military hospital in Thailand. That did it; if before he liked America, now he fell in love with it. If we had asked him today to jump into Kosovo, he probably would have just asked, "When?"

I have another Bulgarian story I would like to relate. One of the marvelous characters that we knew in Bulgaria was a guy who was the head of the Agricultural Producers Cooperative in the mountains of southern Bulgaria in a town called Bansko - which is well known to Bulgarians because it had been the base from which people like Sandanski attacked the Ottoman Turks. Kolyo (the nickname for Nicolai) had been the mayor of Bansko for a number of years and now was the head of the Cooperative. We had met him through Georgi. We spent a memorable weekend with Kolyo. We got to Bansko on a Saturday just in time for lunch. We began about 12:30 or 1 p.m. and left the table about midnight. In between, we - six or seven - finished a bottle of cognac that I had brought, we finished six bottles of wine and a bottle of Cuban rum that

Georgi had brought. We ate and ate and ate. We told stories, we sang; it was a day that will live in memory forever.

The next day, with splitting headaches, we wobbled away about mid-morning to Bansko where Kolyo took us to the local museum. There we saw the photographs of all of the partisans who fought the Turks. He pointed to one mustachioed fighter and said that that had been his grandfather who was a staunch communist. The picture was probably taken in the late 1880s. I suggested that his great-grandfather was not likely to have been a communist since there had not been a Bulgarian Communist Party until the 20th Century. Kolyo replied that I was “like all of the other idiots;” I didn’t understand anything. “He fought the Turks, didn’t he? He fought the landlords, didn’t he? So he was a communist!”

Kolyo also told me a story about the time he had been summoned to Sofia to attend a conference on nutrition; i.e. to be told what the latest word was that his Cooperative was to follow. When he got there, he listened to these “idiots” talk for hour after hour. Finally he could not stand it anymore and stood up and said, “Comrades, you are talking about nutrition and you know nothing about nutrition. Let me tell you about nutrition. What is important is cement. What has cement to do with nutrition? I will tell you. If I can’t get cement, I can’t build shelters for my shepherds; if I don’t build those shelters you aren’t going to get any God-damned yogurt. Now do you understand?” That was typical.

RAYMOND GARTHOFF
Ambassador
Bulgaria (1977-1979)

As a lad Ambassador Raymond Garthoff traveled extensively with his parents to Egypt and Europe. He studied international affairs at Princeton University and went to Yale in 1948 to work on his master's and doctorate in Soviet affairs. Two years later he researched Soviet military doctrine at RAND in Santa Monica. He worked at the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs and other various duties until he was appointed ambassador to Bulgaria in 1977. He was interviewed by Ambassador Horace G. Torbert on June 22, 1989.

GARTHOFF: In any event, I got a call essentially out of the blue one day, offering me the position in Sofia. I was delighted. So I think it was - I take it there was, on the one hand, the feeling that I was deserving and with appropriate experience for this assignment, and on the other hand, at the same time some reservation about putting me back into a position of prominent attention in the arms control field back "in the line of fire" of circles where it might make some difference, specifically on the Hill, from Senator Jackson, in particular.

Q: *Was Jackson still alive? I was trying to remember when he died.*

GARTHOFF: Yes. So in any event, it was that conjunction that led to that decision on their part. I don't know, for that matter, I'm not really sure what my own choice would have been. It might

well have been for Sofia if I'd been given a choice between Sofia and a deputy. . .

Q: Let's face it. The title of ambassador is worth something, aside from anything else.

GARTHOFF: Oh, yes. Absolutely. And for that matter, I didn't on this occasion, only because I wasn't asked, but I may have earlier expressed something of an interest specifically in Bulgaria. But in any event, I think it was purely a question of availability, but it was a happy coincidence, as far as I was concerned, because I had felt from my visit to each of the posts in Eastern Europe, as I mentioned earlier, on a couple of occasions that Sofia was something of a sleeper.

Q: Well, physically, as a place to live and whatnot, it's very much a sleeper.

GARTHOFF: Yes. I found it interesting; and this goes on to that assignment because it was an opportunity for me, who had been studying the Soviet Union for my whole professional life to observe a small communist society on a basis where you could observe fairly fully, and also in terms of Soviet-East European relations. Obviously, it is something which importantly differs in each instance. Still, this was one sort of window of looking into the overall Soviet-East European relationship, Balkan diplomacy, the Bulgarian-Yugoslav and Bulgarian-Yugoslav-Greek-Turkish relations.

Q: Yes, the Macedonian problem.

GARTHOFF: Yes. Those were all things that I, indeed, found interesting.

Q: Were there any specific developments while you were in Bulgaria, specific opportunities to collaborate or negotiate? There were damn few when I was there. [Laughter]

GARTHOFF: Very few, indeed. I will mention them in just a moment and can do so briefly. I might mention before that, when I met [Todor] Zhivkov on presentation of my credentials, and chatted with him. The first thing he said to me was that he understood that I knew a lot about Soviet missiles, and I wouldn't find any missiles in Bulgaria. Of course, I assured him I hadn't come to Bulgaria to look for Soviet missiles; I was interested in Bulgaria and in Bulgarian-American and American-Bulgarian relations.

I happened to be there at the time when Bulgaria was the last of the East European countries in line in this respect, as well as some others, in American policy attention, to negotiate and sign a little agreement removing restricted areas of travel for our representatives, so that we were put on the same basis as all other countries. Of course, there were certain limited border zones and so on, but the discriminatory political restraints of not being able to visit or having to have special permission to visit parts of the country.

Q: You could drive to Bucharest and not take a long detour around, and this sort of thing. [Laughter.]

GARTHOFF: Exactly. So that was one small accomplishment which happened to come due for Bulgaria on my tour.

There was one other incident when, at one point, the Bulgarians began to jam Voice of America again.

Q: Yes, they were jamming it when I was there, too, all the time.

GARTHOFF: They had stopped at a point, a few years before I was there, but for some reason started up again. After I protested that, they stopped again, knocked it off. There was a renewal of exchange agreements, things like that, strictly routine.

Q: Were we still participating in the Plovdiv Fair? That used to be a fairly big event of my era.

GARTHOFF: Yes.

Q: That was something to do.

GARTHOFF: Yes. Did you have any USIA exhibits?

Q: We had the window downstairs.

GARTHOFF: I meant, you know, people coming in. There were a couple of them while I was there, for example a special photography exhibit.

Q: I don't recall that we had any while I was there, except for the fair. That was really about the one effort that worked out. We had various things about our show windows that kept causing a certain amount of trouble, sparring matches.

GARTHOFF: Of course, this was a time at which plenty of attention was already being directed to what would happen in Yugoslavia when Tito passed from the scene. He was still there, but obviously getting along in years and in health. This led to a -- I can't say, I don't know that it had any impact on the thinking back in Washington. I don't really know. But it did lead to a little round-robin of discussion among the three American embassies, in Bucharest, Belgrade and Sofia, about what might happen and about, in effect, Bulgarian and Romanian and Yugoslav policies and interest in the Balkans. This was initiated, as I recall, by our ambassador in Romania at the time, Barnes.

Q: Barnes. Oh, yes.

GARTHOFF: And Tom Simons, who was his DCM. I think they started it. Then Larry Eagleburger in Belgrade, and I joined in. So we had some fun, in any case, exchanging views in a speculative way. Of course, all this was reported back to the Department, but I don't recall that the Department ever reacted or entered into the dialogue. It was not an "action" matter, so there wasn't any call for it, but it was just what I think is, in fact, a relatively infrequent kind of communication among our posts.

Q: It's been done.

GARTHOFF: Oh, yes, it's been done. I know from just following traffic in general in Washington, and also, to some extent, from pouring over back files during my inspection work, I'm aware of some other cases where this has occurred.

Q: For a couple of years, we had Eastern European meetings in Vienna. This was mostly because John Humes was a very expansive operator and liked to entertain, so he'd get all of us up there. But it was a useful thing to do.

GARTHOFF: We didn't have anything like that. There was one while I was there, one of the usual meetings that involved ambassadors to European countries.

Q: Yes.

GARTHOFF: In London.

Q: You were talking about the Macedonian problem. I must confess that most of my efforts while I was there was to keep us from sticking our nose in the Macedonian problem in any sense, which Dick Davies, who was then Deputy Assistant Secretary, handling Eastern Europe, seemed to me to be trying to do. [Laughter.] So I protested this violently, and he felt I was trying to support the Bulgarian view, which I was not at all. I was just trying to keep us out of it!

GARTHOFF: I don't remember the details. I remember also pursuing the same objective that you did, but I don't recall now what it was that occasioned having to make any comment or suggestion on it at all. It wasn't because of any inclination back in the Department at that time to do it, particularly.

Incidentally, I might just remark that in preparation for going to the assignment, I remember asking the Assistant Secretary, George Vest, "Anything in particular I should know? Anything in particular that you want to tell me for the assignment?" And he said, "Oh, Ray, you know better than I do the area." So that was essentially it, my instructions from the Department on our policy and what to do. [Laughter.] There was, naturally, the usual round of briefings and so on, but no particular policy guidance.

Q: Was there still any cooperation on drug traffic with Bulgaria, or had that started to fall out?

GARTHOFF: There was. It had started to diminish.

Q: Became less important, I suppose, because of other sources, but originally there was a great concern about the TIR truck traffic and all that.

GARTHOFF: Yes, there was still some concern. There was some Bulgarian cooperation and there was still some participation, but this is what I think had tailed down by our own Customs people, in conjunction with the Bulgarians. They had together run a little seminar, course, there. But we also got some indications of Bulgarian official involvement in drug trafficking, too, a Bulgarian agency involved in it. So there were two sides to the coin. On the one hand, they were

cooperating.

Q: I was always very suspicious that maybe the objective was to find out how we operated.

GARTHOFF: It may have been, in part, simply to establish some good credentials. It may have been, in part, to drive out some of the opposition, close out some of the competition, because certainly there were some indications, I guess at that time, it was highly classified when I was there. Some of it now has come out in congressional testimony and so forth a couple of years ago, concerning the enterprise Kintex and some of its unsavory activities, in connection with probably letting some drug trafficking go on in exchange for, or in conjunction with, some arms smuggling and things that the Bulgarians were involved in for one or another nefarious purpose, going to Turkey and beyond into the Middle East.

Q: Not only about Bulgaria, but about certain other countries. [Laughter.]

GARTHOFF: Yes, yes. Oh, yes. The other thing I was going to say about preparations for the job, I did spend about nearly two months studying Bulgarian.

Q: I tried hard, too, but I didn't have the background.

GARTHOFF: In fact, what we arranged was a native Bulgarian speaker giving a special little course, normally about eight hours a day, pretty intensive, for my wife, my DCM, and myself. All of us knew Russian, so we had that common foundation. Russian helps in recognition, but it also...

Q: Yes, I know that between Italian and Spanish.

GARTHOFF: Yes. There are a lot of cases where it can be very embarrassing, where the same or similar words have very, very different meanings between the two languages. At any rate, that did provide a foundation for it. The first year while I was there, I had normally an hour a day with a language instructor, and my wife did separately at home, also. The result was that I could read political sorts of things easily enough and I could understand a fair amount of it and I could, with just a little advance preparation, thinking about it and so on, get out and give a toast in Bulgarian and that sort of thing. I found this was not necessary, but it was appreciated. It was helpful in some respects, especially traveling.

I did a fair amount of traveling, officially traveling, also, and arranged trips and so on. While most officials in Sofia spoke Russian and, of course, everyone in Bulgaria studied Russian, most Bulgarians don't really know the language at all well, and many of the provincial party and government officials and so on, whom I met, really didn't have very good Russian. Why should they disadvantage themselves by speaking another language? They would prefer - and did prefer - my speaking in far-from-fluent Bulgarian. So I suppose the net is that it was useful, if for nothing else, at least in showing that I had enough interest to have made the effort and to have learned the language to a certain extent and so on. All the more so, since my Soviet colleague, who had been there seven years, didn't speak Bulgarian. [Laughter.]

I had a few very interesting, long conversations alone with Petr Mladenov, the foreign minister. I spoke Russian with him. But in many other cases and in few cases, of course, people like Andrei Lukanov always spoke English very well. But in other cases, like I got to know pretty well the Director of the National Art Gallery, and through him, got to know some Bulgarian artists and had them come into the residence for films about artists and art and so on, that I got through USIA. That kind of thing, we would do in Bulgarian. So while on rare occasion, where I was making some point in an official conversation with someone who didn't have English or where I didn't have a situation where I felt it appropriate to use Russian, where I would use - and an interpreter to back up - but normally, I just had the combination so that I could use Bulgarian where it was necessary or useful.

Q: You are certainly far superior to anything I ever achieved. I could ask a question, but not always understand the response. [Laughter.]

I guess we'd better begin to wind this up, because we're getting towards the end of this tape, this side. Any other dramatic things that happened before you left? Did you leave of your own choosing, or did they appoint somebody else first? I happened to have left of my own choosing, thinking they'd appoint somebody else right away, and they didn't. Took them a year.

GARTHOFF: No, I got a message saying that they wanted to, in effect, circulate more people. So I was there for just two years, a shade over two years, which was fine, but I would have been quite happy to stay another year. Insofar as it made any difference -- and that's another question - - by that time, I was at a point where I knew that to the extent I was having contacts and being comfortable in knowing the country more generally for all kinds of reporting and other purposes that it came to a conclusion. On the other hand, I was very happy to have been given the opportunity to have the assignment. Since it happened in a number of cases and so on, there was nothing particular about the fact; this was my two years.

Actually, I was put forward for another European embassy position at that time, which, however, went to a political appointment instead. A couple of other things were offered or under consideration for another assignment, but I had been contacted, before leaving Sofia, from Brookings, wanting to know whether I might be interested and available to go there after my then current assignment for a year or longer. And I got in touch and told them that, as a matter of fact, I was interested. I felt at that point that I wanted to turn, or return, to doing more research, reflection, and writing. So I opted for early retirement, for which I was by then eligible, and retired at the end of 1979. I began with Brookings and have been there for ten years. I'm not quite sure how long I'm going to do this, but it's very attractive, because they're paying me a good salary and providing half of a secretary with a word processor, a library, good offices, and everything else to do what I want to do.

G. NORMAN ANDERSON
Deputy Chief of Mission
Sofia (1978-1982)

G. Norman Anderson studied Russian while he was in the Navy and later attended the Russian Institute at Columbia University. He entered the Foreign Service in 1960 and served in Lebanon, Germany, the Soviet Union, Morocco, Bulgaria, Tunis, Sudan, and Macedonia. He was interviewed by J. P. Moffat on June 18, 1996.

Q: One of the more frustrating experiences where you were, as I understand, trained in the Ukrainian language in preparation for being assigned as Consul General to Kiev, a post to be opened. Unfortunately, this was interrupted by the Afghan war. Did you find it as frustrating an experience as it must have been?

ANDERSON: My wife and I were in Ukrainian together, and we got to know the Ukrainian community in Washington quite well, a very nice group. However, at Christmas in 1979 the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and President Carter decided not to open the post that we were going to the following summer. So, this was quite frustrating; however, we were shifted to another Slavic language, Bulgarian, and we ended up going to the area, at least, to Sofia, where I was DCM.

Q: We were always brought up on the truism that Bulgaria was the closest state to the Soviet Union in the outside world, and yet now, since the disappearance of the Soviet Union, Bulgaria has been very surprisingly successful as an independent state. Do you have any wisdom to share on what makes Bulgarians tick?

ANDERSON: Bulgaria in the early 1980s was not quite the overt police state that, say, Romania was. The president at the time, Todor Zhivkov, was able to keep very tight control, but not through having a lot of policemen in uniform in evidence, and there were no Soviet troops in the country. I think the Bulgarians did show a certain fondness for the Russians because the Russians had liberated them in 1878 from the Turks and Russia lost something like 200,000 troops killed in that campaign. So, there is a very long term historical relationship. At the present time Bulgaria still, I think, resembles Russia more than a lot of the other states in the area. Although most Bulgarians have studied Russian, for example, some of the other people of the area, such as the Yugoslavs, have not done that. But even today, the Bulgarians have reverted to rule by their Socialist party, which is made up of former Communist leaders. So, in a way, now they're more Russian than the Russians. The Russians have turned to greater democracy, and recently voted against the Communists.

Q: While you were there what was your main preoccupation at work?

ANDERSON: We were trying to broaden our relations with Bulgaria, to try to wean it from the Soviet Bloc. This was obviously a very long term effort. It was not going to happen overnight. But we did, for example, try to develop commercial relations. Various American companies became involved, Pepsi Cola, for example, became involved with Bulgaria and started buying Bulgarian wine for sale in the United States. There was a trade fair in which American companies took part in Plovdiv. All in all, though, progress was extremely slow, the control of the Communist party over the country was very, very firm, despite the fact that such control was not overt. It was pretty subtle. We spent two years there and we were never once invited into a

private home. Whereas recently we happened to go back to Bulgaria several times and were invited to homes practically every day.

Q: We've been led to believe that the Soviet KGB used the Bulgarians for various purposes over the years. Did you detect any of this?

ANDERSON: Just at the time I was leaving, there was an attempt against the Pope and many people thought the Bulgarian secret service, which was called the DS, was involved in it at the behest of the KGB. I think the situation is a bit unclear, as to whether that was actually true or not. Undoubtedly the two secret services - the KGB and DS - were very closely involved and the Russian ambassador was a God-like commissar figure in Sofia. So the connections were very, very strong.

Q: Were you able to have good relationships with your Soviet colleagues there?

ANDERSON: Actually I did have quite a good relationship with the Soviet DCM there. There were two different DCMs. The first one was quite friendly and we had many conversations. The second one was more of an ideologue and he had written a book about the United States. He'd never been to the United States, but he wrote a book about capitalist exploitation and repression of the masses, from the far away vantage point of Moscow. The Soviet Embassy people nevertheless were relatively friendly and we did get together quite a bit.

JACK R. PERRY
Ambassador
Bulgaria (1979-1981)

Ambassador Jack R. Perry was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia in 1930. He entered the Foreign Service in 1959. His career included assignments to the Soviet Union, France, Czechoslovakia, and Sweden. He was ambassador to Bulgaria from 1979 to 1981. Mr. Perry was interviewed by Henry E. Mattox on July 2nd and October 27, 1992.

Q: Do you know how you got chosen to go to Sofia, Bulgaria?

PERRY: I think so. Being chosen as deputy executive secretary was a sign that there was some confidence in me and that I had good friends who were in fairly influential places. When I went to State, I told Peter that, on the advice of my predecessor, David Anderson, who went off as ambassador to Yugoslavia, a year would probably enough. And Peter was kind enough to agree to that. I think, by the time a year was over, I was worn out, and he was glad that I had finished my year and he could get somebody else in there anyway. It was a hard year, and I'm not so sure that I was as well cut out for that as people like Peter Tarnoff and Frank Wisner, who, I must say, had lightning-fast minds and whom I respected a great deal. They could do the policy-decision process in a way that I'm not sure I was cut out for. I think I was much better at an embassy than I was in the State Department. At any rate, a year was enough.

When there was going to be a meeting to decide ambassadors, the three of us - Peter, Frank, and I - would meet before, and we would have the list, and we would discuss the State Department people that would go up. Now, of course, we knew nothing about the politicians that were coming from the other side that would go directly to the White House. But we did know whom in Personnel they were putting up for ambassador, and we had some voice in it. Peter Tarnoff particularly had a big voice, and we sort of advised him; we would occasionally know people that he wouldn't know. I'm not saying that he went against Personnel, but he was able to influence largely what Personnel did.

And so I guess that with my Soviet background and having been DCM at a couple of posts and chargé a good deal and all of that, it was considered that I was old enough for the thing. And so what was available? Well, Bulgaria was available. EUR (the European Bureau) was always my home bureau, and it's where I'd served all of my posts, and so it was natural that that's where I would find an ambassadorship if I found one.

I remember that Harry Barnes, who was then director general, said, "Jack, don't go to Bulgaria. Wait and get something bigger and better." Because that was probably, I guess, maybe except for Malta, the last and the least of the European ambassadorial posts.

But I said to myself, and I said to my wife, "You know, Washington is a funny place. One never knows what will happen about these things, and six months from now I may be dead or something."

Q: Or you may have blotted your copybook.

PERRY: Exactly. So I said, "Listen, if I have a chance at Bulgaria, I'm going to take it." And I did. And I've never been sorry.

Q: Jack, I hate to say this, but I think we're going to have to schedule a third meeting somewhere along the line, because there is a certain amount of time that these things are useful and there's a certain amount of tape that runs out, believe it or not. So I would just as soon hold, if you don't mind, a couple of overview questions that I'd like to ask you, and a survey of your service in Sofia. I'd like to hold it for a little later. There's an unusual opportunity here, I think, for you to be able to compare and contrast service with political ambassadors, because you had two or three in a row there.

PERRY: I had Sarge Shriver in Paris, too. That was educational.

Q: Even though these were relatively small posts, you had, at least a couple of them there, political appointee ambassadors, and then almost, not quite, almost immediately you go off, as a careerist yourself, as an ambassador, and a certain number of years have passed, so you're able to see with some objectivity the advantages and the disadvantages that the two types of fish of ambassadors have been. I'd like to pursue that a little bit at another time.

PERRY: It's a good subject. I would also be glad to have an opportunity, if you decide that you

have the time to ask me, to talk a little bit about Dean Rusk because since leaving the Foreign Service I have had a great deal of contact with him, and it would be fun to talk a little bit about it, especially as compared with Cy Vance, that's an interesting. . .

Q: That would be, I think, invaluable for the future historian. These tapes, as you know, are destined for the perusal of future historians, historians perhaps a generation from now, ten to twenty years from now or whatever, and so those of us who have some direct knowledge of historic figures, such as Dean Rusk, especially, who really, for the young historian nowadays, I suppose, seems like ancient history, it would be really quite unusual to have a chance to get your views on that. Would you please remind me about that when we talk again?

PERRY: Sure, okay. I will.

Q: My mind is like a steel sieve.

PERRY: I like to talk about Dean Rusk, because he's one of my heroes, so I will be glad to.

Q: This particular cassette I'm going to send in for transcription, because it takes quite a while anyway, as I understand it, but with the understanding that we're going to hit another tape somewhere along the line.

PERRY: Sure. It will give me an excuse to come back up to Chapel Hill.

Q: Very good. I appreciate your time. We will just call it quits at this point, and we'll pick up again on another date.

PERRY: Great. Thanks to you.

JOHN D. CASWELL
Chief, Political/Economic Section
Sofia (1980-1982)

John Caswell was born in Massachusetts in 1947 and educated at Franklin & Marshall College and the Fletcher School at Tufts. He entered the Foreign Service in 1974. His career included posts in Rio de Janeiro, Sofia, Lima and Brasilia. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2000.

Q: Often when one takes a course in a language, you pick up an awful lot about the country from your instructor. I certainly did when I took Serbian, and we had two unreconstructed Serb nationalists, so I was able to understand the situation there. How did you find it with your Bulgarian instructors? Were you picking up a bit about Bulgaria?

CASWELL: I think that's true. I had an interesting combination. I had essentially two language instructors, and one of them was roughly my age, which at the time was early 30s, so she had

gotten out after the Communists had been in power. She was born, I guess, about the time the Communists came to power in '47, and she managed to escape. She didn't go into great detail talking about it, but essentially it sounds like she got to Yugoslavia and she managed to somehow walk out. She had a long experience in an internment camp for refugees in Austria and then eventually managed to marry an American. So she had the very un-Bulgarian-sounding name of Virginia Brennan. She was a very funny character. She had a very lively personality and she was given to very great swings in emotion. I don't want to call it manic depressive but she was very, very happy sometimes and kind of down in the dumps other times. She would talk a lot about how much she missed not being able to go back to Bulgaria, especially when her father died and she couldn't go back. Her mother was still there alone, and so forth and so on. She suffered quite a bit. The other teacher was an older woman. I would say she was easily somewhere in her 60s. She had left Bulgaria long before. She actually married a Serb, and she left Bulgaria before the Communists ever took over. I can't remember exactly her story when she came to the United States, but she had been in the United States for some time, she was from a very different generation. She was a very cultured lady. She had been an opera singer. Bulgaria has a tradition of raising opera singers. She had traveled in Europe and was rather more cosmopolitan before she eventually ended up in this country.

Q: How did you find Bulgarian as a language?

CASWELL: I found it challenging, let's put it this way. I had never studied any Slavic languages, so the first challenge right off the bat was, unlike Polish and Czech - Hungarian is not a Slavic language - unlike some of the other Eastern European languages, they use the Cyrillic alphabet. That was the first challenge you had, to get used to the Cyrillic alphabet. Then, of course, the grammar structure was different. Fortunately Bulgarian doesn't decline nouns, so you didn't have to deal with that. But it was rather a more alien language, had fewer English cognates than something like Spanish or Portuguese, so it was harder. There was a reason why it was 44 weeks long. I also found that you really had to work harder at it and you had to keep working at it. If you took a break and you didn't think about it for a week or two, if you were on vacation or something like this, it was harder to get back into it. It seemed to escape your mind faster than Spanish or Portuguese.

Q: You got out there in 1980, and you were there from 1980 to when?

CASWELL: Essentially July '80 till July '82.

Q: Who was the ambassador there?

CASWELL: We had two. The first ambassador that I worked under was a man named Jack Perry, and the second ambassador was a man named Robert Barry. Both of them were seasoned Soviet hands and so brought that kind of perspective many times, looking at Bulgaria through a Soviet lens.

Q: I remember Bob Barry as being a young vice consul in Zagreb when I was a senior consular officer in Belgrade.

CASWELL: Well, he's still out, you know.

Q: He's in Bosnia with OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe).

CASWELL: Right.

Q: What was the situation in Bulgaria when you got there in 1980?

CASWELL: Well, essentially Bulgaria was the most loyal probably of the Eastern European satellites. The joke was that it was the 16th Soviet Socialist Republic, more Soviet than the Soviets sometimes it seemed, at least the leadership of the Bulgarian Communist Party was. Bulgaria had some importance to us. I think primarily what we were focusing on was narcotics, because it sat astride one of the principal over-land trafficking routes, transit routes, for narcotics from Turkey and the Middle East into Europe and then onward to the United States. I can't remember where the initiative first came from, whether they were showing themselves willing to cooperate with us or whether we were pursuing it first and then they were responding to us, but we were in effect exploring and trying to expand some limited cooperation with them. It was one of the few areas where it seemed like we could find some common ground. I was the narcotics coordinator amongst other things. Right off the bat when I arrived, for example, we were in the latter stages of organizing a regional counter-narcotics cooperation conference which would be co-hosted by the Bulgarian Customs and U.S. Customs, to which customs services in the region, meaning European and some from Turkey and the Middle East - no, actually the Turks were not invited because the Bulgarians were not getting along with them - mostly Europeans, would come and kind of compare notes about what worked and what didn't work and what were the latest intelligence trends and what might be training initiatives and so forth and so on. This was pretty revolutionary for that time period, to have the United States and the Bulgarians, of all people, actually cosponsoring something together and working pretty constructively. So this was probably the major positive thing we were trying to do. The time period that I was in the country was when the Papal assassination attempt involving the Turk, Mehmed Ali Aja, took place. As investigations into Mr. Aja's background proceeded, it emerged that he had links or connections to the Bulgarians, the Bulgarian Secret Service, and there were some suspicions that perhaps through the Bulgarian Secret Service the Soviets were involved in trying to kill the Pope [who was Polish and having an impact in his native land the Soviets disapproved of]. That was the other thing that was of major interest to the United States at that time.

Q: The Bulgarians, hadn't their Secret Service killed somebody in England?

CASWELL: Georgi Markov with the umbrella - they were also notorious for that.

Q: The Bulgarians were kind of looked upon as being kind of nasty in this particular respect.

CASWELL: That's exactly right. They were kind of the Taliban of the Eastern European satellites and seemed to be willing to do the dirtiest work, or at least that was their reputation. And being down in the Balkans and along the border with Turkey and so forth and Greece, there were lots of stories about smuggling and not just drug smuggling. It was a rather Byzantine sort of place. That was one of the things that impressed me from my service in Bulgaria, that it was

not just a communist country. Yes, it had a Marxist-Leninist superstructure, if you will, imposed on the society, but in many ways it was also a developing country and it was also preeminently a Balkan country and a Byzantine country and the way business really many times got done was through unofficial personal connections, family connections. I knew a dissident sort of fellow who at one time earlier in his career had worked as an accountant, he joked and said, "I understand in the West you have two sets of books; you have one that you show the tax collector and you have one that really reflects what's going on in the company; but here in Bulgaria typically we have at least three sets of books. There's one that you show the officials from the planning ministry or whatever or the economic ministry that you are subservient to, and there's a second set of books which you show to your colleagues and your immediate supervisor, and there's a third set of books which reflect reality, what you're really doing.

Q: Let's talk about dealing with the government. How did you find it at this period of time? Relations with the Soviet Union went sour at this point - we're talking about the invasion of Afghanistan and its aftermath. You sort of straddled the end of the Carter and early Reagan administrations. This is not a very happy time between certainly the U.S. and the Soviets.

CASWELL: No, they were difficult, the way we had to conduct business. In fact, what I highlighted, the dealings that we had in terms of narcotics coordination, at least initially when I was there, was a real exception. It was one area where we could get ready access to the senior and action officers within Bulgarian Customs. Anytime I wanted to talk to my counterpart - he was my counterpart but he was also the Deputy Director of Bulgarian Customs, so he was a fairly senior guy, a man named Theodore Tsvetkov - I could literally pick up the phone and call him, and I could actually get him on the phone right away, or if he weren't there and I left word with his secretary that I needed to speak with him, he'd actually call me back and we could actually do things together and we could accomplish things. Otherwise, we really were restricted to a very small number of contacts that we could actually talk to. Essentially I could call up the America desk at the Foreign Ministry the America desk at the Ministry of Foreign Trade - somebody, say, at my level. The Ambassador or the DCM could call up the Director of what they called, I recall, the Third Department or the Fourth Department of the Foreign Ministry, but essentially the department that dealt with the United States and the Western European countries, and they could talk to the Director or Deputy Director of that department. But everything had to be channeled through them, and if you wanted to try to talk to anybody else, to set up an appointment, you had to call what was euphemistically called "protocol", but everybody understood that this was a euphemism for essentially the security service, and they would decide, probably together with the political department in the foreign ministry, whether to grant the meeting or not grant the meeting. Depending upon the state of political relations, if things happened to be going along relatively well, we were more likely to get access. If things were doing poorly, we were not granted access. They would either never call you back, or each time you would call them they would kind of stonewall and say, "Well, we don't know yet. Don't call us; we'll call you when we have an answer," and never called back. Or they would call back weeks or sometimes months later and say, "Sorry, your request was turned down." Moreover, there were substantial parts of the country which were permanently forbidden zones for diplomats to travel in, so in effect considerable swaths of the country, from the border with Yugoslavia and the border with Greece and the border with Turkey many kilometers back from the border, were forbidden zones, security zones which we were not able to go into. If you

wanted to travel around, if you wanted to go to one of the other cities, again you had to program everything through the central protocol at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So it was a very mechanistic, clumsy way to do it, and it was in effect a tap which the Bulgarians could turn on and turn off according to their political whims.

Q: What was in it for the Bulgarians at this particular time, to be so cooperative over customs?

CASWELL: That's an interesting question. Certainly, without going into any kind of conspiracy theory, you could say that what they were looking for was legitimacy. They were looking for legitimacy in the eyes of their customs counterparts, and to a certain extent you could argue that this would rub off on the government as a whole, that here drugs were a scourge that we all could agree to combat. Regardless of whatever our ideologies were or our policy predilections on social and economic policies or international security questions, this was something we could all agree was bad and as professionals and as human beings we could cooperate, and so they wanted to cooperate. The darker theory which emerged in the time period that I was in the country was we noticed that there was a contradiction in this and that, yes indeed, they did cooperate with us, yes indeed, they did catch some traffickers, they did confiscate some illicit drugs, they did destroy the illicit drugs, they did cooperate with the U.N. on these sorts of issues and Interpol, but what appeared to be the case was that some smugglers who were in fact notorious smugglers, particularly smugglers who were well known to the Turkish authorities, seemed to have carte blanche to operate in Bulgaria. The Bulgarians were always attuned to trying to trade on their location and the natural beauty of the country to try to attract Western tourism, whether it was along the beaches, on the Black Sea, or they have some very beautiful mountainous areas that are great for skiing or hiking in the summertime, so they would build luxury hotels in these areas. After a while they learned that they didn't really have the know-how to really run a four-star international-class luxury hotel themselves very well, so they would purchase on a sort of a turnkey basis, but with also some technical assistance, hotels to be constructed and run initially by French hotel firms, Japanese hotel firms, Swedish hotel firms, etcetera, and these were scattered around in different places. They would have amenities in them - beautiful indoor heated swimming pools, bowling alleys - and they also had other amenities like casino gambling, which in socialist puritanical Bulgaria was a "no-no." Ordinary Bulgarians could not go into these casinos, but people who had hard currency, Western tourists or whatever, were welcome, and this was seen as a way to attract them. Well, they had a big hotel like that on the outskirts of Sofia called the Hotel Vitosha, and the Vitosha had a well known gambling casino up on the top floor, about the 19th floor or so, of the hotel. Interesting enough, they had Lebanese croupiers, but they didn't entire trust the Lebanese croupiers so they hired British overseers from private clubs in London to come down to be the managers to watch the croupiers to make sure the croupiers were not skimming off some of the profits. I guess they felt the Brits were more honest. I got to know some of these guys. You'd go into the casino and sometimes it was a little bit like - do you remember the first Star Wars movie, some of these unseemly nightclubs with all these kind of weird galactic characters hanging around, tough-looking characters? Well, in the Vitosha Casino, they didn't have three heads, of course, but they were really tough, burly-looking kind of guys with sort of suspicious-looking bulges in their jackets. Who were some of these guys? With time I found out that at least some of them were Turkish smugglers. I talked with my colleague at the Turkish embassy, and he said, "Oh, yes, we're sure those guys have sweetheart deals with the Secret Service, Bulgarian Secret Service and, in effect, for a share of

the profit, they are probably turning a blind eye to these guys smuggling. Some of it undoubtedly is smuggling untaxed cigarettes, bootleg liquor, gold, but we also believe they're involved in gun running and we also believe they're involved in running heroine and hashish and some other stuff." So out of that, I went down and had a conversation where I talked to a Bulgarian official about this. We happened to be in a restaurant, and it was at the end of a very nice conversation and everything was very warm and friendly and easy-going and so forth, and I said, "By the way, we noticed this anomaly. I've seen them myself. I've talked with other people," not saying I was talking to Turkish officials about it, and I said, "What gives?" My interlocutor suddenly became very nervous and started sort of looking over his shoulder and said, "Don't say stuff like that. I can assure you that we're doing our very best." I can't remember his exact phraseology, but what he was intimating was that they were doing the best under the circumstances that were presented to them but their hands were tied about certain things, and really it didn't do any good for me to talk about and it was only going to rock the boat, and so forth and so on. Well, of course, we did confront them about it, and it did sour the relationship a good deal in the time period. As a matter of fact, when I left Bulgaria, this was just coming to a head, and after I left Bulgaria in 1982, the cooperation on counter-narcotic issues with Bulgarian Customs became rather testy. When I came back into Bulgarian affairs in 1985 when I was working as the Bulgarian Desk Officer in the European Bureau, some of the worst of the bad feelings were beginning to subside and I guess we had decided either no more hard evidence was coming to light or really no hard evidence was confirmed, it was just putting two and two together from what we could observe, and the Bulgarians were saying, "Let's put this behind us and let's see where we can find areas to cooperate," and I think we had decided, well, this was maybe a better basis than none to try to do something, and so we were again moving back towards reestablishing some cooperation, but it really cooled things off for a while.

Q: Were you getting information about truck license plates and trucks and all these, TIR trucks, I guess, or trans-something or other?

CASWELL: I forget what TIR stands for, but in effect the idea was that those trucks would be inspected by Customs at the point of origin, certified that they were good, and then the cargo was sealed. They were sealed vans, and the notion was that then these trucks would pass borders through Europe and did not have to be opened and reinspected by customs people at every single border as they made their way across Europe. Then they were reopened and, I guess, inspected again at the end destination. It was a customs facilitation procedure.

Q: Were you getting information, say, from our drug people in Ankara and Istanbul or from somewhere else about shipments, and you would pass them on to Customs, or from Turkish authorities and all this?

CASWELL: Yes, that was part of my job. We would periodically get information from the DEA. We didn't have a DEA agent in Sofia, but there was a regional agent up in Vienna who would cover several of these countries including Bulgaria. Periodically I would get messages from him saying, "We have reason to believe, or good evidence or whatever, that this passenger or this truck with this plate number or whatever is going to try to cross the border coming from Turkey to Bulgaria at" - whatever the international highway border crossing point was called; I can't remember now - "and they should search it." I would always pass this information to Mr.

Tsvetkov, and he was pretty good about then getting back to me subsequently and saying either, "A truck of that description never came across the border," or "It came across the border and we didn't find anything," or "Indeed the information was good and we got X number of kilos of heroine off it."

Q: How about the Turks? The Turkish embassy would be aware of who some of their guys were. Did you have the feeling that in the Turkish establishment some people were being given a free ride because of the influence?

CASWELL: Oh yes. The Turkish-Bulgarian relationship was very difficult, and it had to do with the fact that both there was a Turkish ethnic and linguistic minority in Bulgaria which was not particularly well treated. Secondly, the Turks had a lot of suspicions, as the case of Mehmed Ali Aja came to reveal in public these suspicions were well founded, that the Bulgarian Secret Services were supporting Turkish leftists who were interested in overturning the political system in Turkey.

Q: The Gray Wolves or...

CASWELL: That's right. The Gray Wolves was one notorious group that Aja was involved with. Dev Sol was another one. They were concerned in particular from their security perspective that Turkish underworld types and leftists were working hand in glove with the Bulgarian Secret Service and they were buying weapons in Bulgaria or they were being allowed to take weapons through Bulgaria and then smuggle them back into Turkey to arm the underworld, just ordinary criminals, and armed leftist groups, urban guerilla types, in Turkey. Now, I can't remember particularly whether they were concerned about these arms going from Bulgaria and getting out to eastern Turkey where the Kurds were also active. That probably was in the formula, but I don't particularly remember that. So, yes, and they felt, like when they went to the Bulgarian authorities and were asking for help about this stuff, that the Bulgarians basically would feign sincerity but were really cynically doing this behind their backs and were not cooperating. So the Turks were very cynical about the Bulgarian regime.

Q: What about terrorist training and this sort of thing? One has heard about camps, in Eastern Germany and Czechoslovakia and all, of essentially terrorists, often of Middle Eastern terrorists, getting training in weapons and all this and going out and doing nasty things to Israelis and to the Western countries. Were you getting a feel for the role of Bulgaria in this particular business?

CASWELL: I have to confess that I never saw any real good hard evidence. I agree with you that we were suspicious that that sort of thing was going on, but in terms of in-country hard evidence that it was going on, no. It was obvious as could be to anybody who had their eyes open in Sofia that you would walk into any cafe, particularly around the larger hotels, and see lots and lots of Middle Eastern people and you could hear Arabic being spoken and you would wonder to yourself why, what are these people doing here.

Q: I assume they're all hunched over smoking cigarettes and looking furtive.

CASWELL: Yes, and drinking little demitasses of what was called *Turskato cafe*, Turkish coffee. Other than just sort of wondering aloud to yourself why are these guys all here. Some of them could be legitimate transients and some people might be businessmen, but how much business is there to do in Bulgaria and what did Bulgaria really produce that these people would be coming here to buy. And Bulgaria had very good political links with the PLO, with - what do they call it? - the Patriotic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which was George Habash's group. George Habash was a regular visitor to Sofia and would be lionized in the press. Bulgaria had a great relationship with Libya too. It was one of their major commercial partners. There were lots of people going back and forth, particular Bulgarian engineers and construction firms, going off to do large infrastructure projects in Libya in return for payments in petroleum. They had a similar sort of relationship with Iraq and Syria, basically all of the kind of nefarious, notorious, suspicious Arab countries or regimes or guerilla groups, ones that we were most suspicious of being involved, either directly involved in terrorism or supporting or harboring terrorists. Bulgaria seemed to be kind of like in the Soviet bloc almost "designated hitters" for dealing with those sorts of regimes and those sorts of countries. It made you think that some people were, and maybe in some of those areas where we were prohibited from traveling, that we could not get into, there may have been indeed camps where these people were trained, but I never personally saw any evidence that we gathered in country that could confirm that.

Q: Did you have people trying to seek asylum or coming to the embassy or people coming and bringing you information and that sort of thing?

CASWELL: Remarkably little of that, and I think a major reason for that was that we had a very prominent downtown location which was a source of irritation in effect in the relationship. But what would happen, we made use of this and we tried to encourage people to come into the building. The embassy building was right on one of the principal squares in downtown Sofia, but what Bulgarian authorities did to counteract that was they would post never less than one and usually several uniformed, armed militiamen right outside our door parading prominently up and down the sidewalk in front of the building to discourage anybody from trying to go in. About the only people that would come and go in our embassy were the embassy employees themselves, the FSN local employees which we were permitted to hire by the protocol department, so they were all in effect cleared with state security, and Third World, or third country but they were usually Third World, students who were studying at Bulgarian universities and wanted to come and make use of USIS library. The U.S. Information Service had a library which was on the ground floor of our building, so foreign students would come in and use the library. What we did was - it was kind of a cat-and-mouse game - we turned the front of the building into display-case windows like you would see in a department store or whatever, and so we, or USIS specifically, would then mount photo exhibitions, photo and text exhibitions of various themes about life in the United States or what was going on in the world or whatever so that, even though Bulgarian people on the sidewalk would be intimidated against actually going into the building and using the library or reading newspapers or whatever, they could look at the windows. This was, if you will, one of our propaganda platforms in the embassy. One of the reasons why, during the whole time period I was in the embassy and still when I was on the desk later on, the Bulgarian authorities were constantly trying to get us out of that building, because, I think, it was an irritation for them, because large crowds would all the time be milling around looking at these windows, so they wanted to force us to take an embassy that they were building, which was

maybe ten miles or so out of town. Ambassador Barry remarked that a lot of the way we conducted relations was very much governed by reciprocity. If they're going to do this to us, then we're going to do something to them in their embassy back in Washington. So he used to refer to the fact that, if we were going to be forced to move to this other location out in the suburb called Ovchekupal, which literally means 'the sheep's cupola' - as though there was like a little bandstand or a cupola out in a sheep meadow - then we should reciprocate with something he called 'the Rockville solution', which was that we should force the Bulgarian embassy to move to Rockville, get them out of Washington, and isolate them there.

Q: You mentioned the students. I was in Belgrade around '64 or '65 when there was a huge exodus of African students from the universities in Bulgaria. The students didn't like to be called Cherni, black monkeys, and other things, and they peeled off and most of them ended up coming to the American embassy where I would interview them before we got them on back to Western Europe and to the United States. Where were the students coming from? Were they mostly African, and how were they being treated?

CASWELL: I guess I would say that 'mostly' is probably the right word; at least a large number of them came from African countries. From the stories that we got from talking to them, they weren't treated particularly well by ordinary Bulgarians. I guess some Bulgarians might treat them all right, but they could be expected to receive insults or whatever from other Bulgarians riding the trams around town or whatever. So, yes, I think we felt that the experience in socialist Bulgaria was not necessarily something that would turn these students into good socialists and think that this was what they should try to work for in their home countries when they return. The consular officer would meet these students most often, because they would come into the embassy and they would be asking about what were the possibilities to get scholarships and/or visas to go to the United States to study at a 'real university' as they would put it. I don't think it necessarily was very effective [from a Bulgarian perspective to bring these students to Bulgaria]. There were also certainly Latin American students. There were about a half dozen Latin American embassies in Sofia and I got to know diplomats from all of them rather well given my background. It seemed as though in all of their cases one of the principal briefs at their embassies was to watch the students, both in the sense of helping them and help take care of them if they had any problems or had to communicate some messages back home, but also to be aware of what their political inclinations and activities were and associations. I don't remember hearing about Asian students so much. There were Middle Eastern students, there were African students, and there were some Latin Americans. Undoubtedly there were probably also some Pakistani and Indian students, too; I just don't remember them.

Q: What about traveling around? Were you able, getting yourself cleared to go and all? Was this at all productive, getting yourself off and calling on local officials and industries and that sort of thing?

CASWELL: The way I would describe it was that we could travel in the central part of the country, which was not in the permanently restricted zones. The permanently restricted zones would run anywhere from, say, 10 kilometers from the frontier alongside Yugoslavia to 40 or 50 kilometers from the frontier along the Greek and Turkish borders. In those areas you could never go. In the rest of the country you could pretty much drive around. You would pick up tails where

you have *milizia* or an unmarked car following you, but you were quite sure there were some burly policemen in it riding around following you wherever you went. But the utility of that sort of thing was rather limited, I think, because, while you could travel around without calling ahead in advance, you couldn't just walk in on an official and say, "I want to meet with you. Would you meet with me?" And it was very difficult to get the appointments. You had to call up Central Protocol in advance to say, "I want to travel to this place to meet with somebody," unless the Ambassador did it and it was in connection with something like the Plovdiv International Trade Fair, which happened every year. (End of tape)

So what you could do - and I did this on occasion - would be to say, "Okay, I'm going to go to this place," down as far as I could go in Macedonia or this place in central Bulgaria, "and I'm going to drive around and see what I can see, maybe go in and try to talk to somebody in a coffee bar or go in a park and see if I can strike up a conversation with somebody, or go and ask somebody on the street directions and then see if I can strike up a conversation," and you could do it many times until they saw the big, burly policeman behind you. I on a number of occasions had instances where I was talking to a Bulgarian and all of a sudden I see this look go across the Bulgarian's face like he understands that this foreigner he's talking to is a no-no because there are all these secret police types or militiamen come up and they'd clam up or they would just go, they'd just run away. So it was rather difficult. The exception to that would be I had a colleague who could speak Turkish, and we would sometimes go out into the Turkish areas and particularly talk to those people. If you could get away from the tail and you didn't see the police around, these people might open up to you. They wouldn't open up to you necessarily if you spoke to them in Bulgarian, but they would open up if a person was speaking Turkish to them.

Q: Did the Bulgarian secret police play games like try to entice you with girls or that type of thing, or was that pretty much a Soviet specialty?

CASWELL: I think that did go on. There were instances where I became suspicious that that was happening and got myself out of the precinct or didn't go over and strike up the conversation with the rather striking young woman. For example, I was interested in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. Remember this is the time period, this coincided with what was going on in Poland where the Roman Catholic Church was really in the forefront of organizing and encouraging people to stand up to the system. This was not happening with the Bulgarian Orthodox Church; it was a different beast. But I was still interested in the church and sort of the people that would go into it and what was happening or not happening and why it wasn't happening. Frequently I would take a break during the middle of the day and just go out for a walk. When I'd go for a walk, I would walk around town and I would walk into an Orthodox Church, and I would maybe just walk around, look around, look at who's around, maybe go up to an icon and say a prayer, buy a candle, light a candle, do some of the things that you do. One time there was a rather striking young woman just sort of hanging around outside the church who walked in when I did or followed me in, and I was suspicious because that's not the sort of person you usually see around a Bulgarian church, and I was suspicious that maybe she was somebody that the Secret Service thought that I would be interested in.

Q: Did you run across the Macedonian thing. I served both five years in Yugoslavia and four years in Greece. Is Macedonian really a language? It is this or that? Anytime they try to get

these three countries, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia and Greece, together, they usually explode because of the Macedonia thing. I was wondering on your part, what was the state of that in Bulgaria during your time there.

CASWELL: They did engage periodically in I guess I would call them dueling editorials in newspapers. A story would emerge in the Yugoslav press or media that would be making assertions about Macedonia, Macedonian culture and Macedonian history and so forth and so on that just taunted the Bulgarians, and then you would find stuff in the Bulgarian press mocking this saying that obviously this is [Bulgarian culture and history because there is no such thing as a separate Macedonian culture. But it didn't really get beyond that. There weren't any real major tensions or any indications that we picked up of Bulgarians or Bulgarian agents trying to intervene or cause problems in Varder Macedonia, which was what the Bulgarians called the Macedonian Republic in Yugoslavia. I wouldn't call it a major issue, but it was something that was always in the background and periodically an ember would brighten and then it would die down again.

Q: The Greeks, I assume, had an embassy there. Did we have much to do with them?

CASWELL: Yes, we found that the Greeks seemed to be among the best informed of the Western embassies in Bulgaria. We had 26 people in our embassy and that included secretaries and Marine guards and communicators and so forth, which by U.S. standards is relatively small, but by the standards of Western embassies in Sofia was fairly large, and we found that there were really only a handful of other embassies, Western embassies, that had much in the way of capabilities. A lot of people would come and try to pick our brains to learn what they could from us, but we didn't really have kind of a two-way exchange. The Greeks were among the better. The British embassy was also pretty good, so was the French embassy, the German embassy was pretty good, and if you want to call the Turks honorary Westerners, you could say that they were good for some issues, but the Greeks seemed to have a little bit of a favored relationship, if you will, with Bulgarians, because both of them distrusted the Turks, I think, and they also had some commercial interests. There were some Greek traders who would come up and sell stuff to the Bulgarians, and I think there were historic links back with Thessaloniki in northern Greece with Bulgaria, so a lot of the Western goods that found their way into the hard currency stores in Bulgaria did so through Greece. The hard currency stores in Bulgaria were called *CORICOM*, an acronym; I'm not sure what it really stood for, but we used to say it stood for Correction for Communism. But anyway, a lot of the Western consumer goods that would appear in the *CORICOM*, I think, got there through Greece, and in fact a lot of Greeks would travel up to Bulgaria to buy stuff. They could buy it cheaper in the *CORICOM* stores, then bring it back to Greece to their homes. So it seems like that there was substantial, relatively speaking, of cross-border trade between Greece and Bulgaria. And then the Greeks, I guess because they're Balkans and they understood the history and the region and so forth, seemed to be wily and seemed to be relatively well informed as to what was going on.

Q: What was Bulgaria producing? I can think of tobacco and attar of roses.

CASWELL: These are traditional products, that's right.

Q: What role were they playing within the Soviet orbit?

CASWELL: One of the major things that they were producers of that most people don't appreciate is wine. As a matter of fact, I forget the exact statistic now, but after France and Italy certainly Bulgaria is one of the largest wine producers in the world. The problem is they've always had great problems with quality control, so you can get some very good wine and you can get some ordinary wine which is not bad and inexpensive and you can get some real lousy wine. They didn't know anything about marketing, and so you'd go in a store and the bottles were all scratched and it didn't have a label on it or the label was upside down. It just didn't look attractive. You could go into the store one time, buy that label, try it and say, "Wow, that's really good wine. I've got to buy more of that," go back again, buy the same label, and it's undrinkable, it's like vinegar. So their attempts to sell wine in the West for hard currency have often floundered on that problem, the lack of marketing and lack of quality control. But they were addressing that. As a matter of fact, in the time period I was in the country, one of the big deals they did was they struck a deal with Pepsico, which had, at least in those days, a wine subsidiary with the non-Pepsico-sounding name of Monsieur Henri, and Monsieur Henri struck a deal with VINIMPEX, which is the big wine conglomerate in Bulgaria to produce wine under what came to be known as the Trakia label. They designed a nice label with ancient gold coins with the head of Alexander the Great on it, and you had to look real hard to find that it was Bulgarian wine, but it was not bad wine. It was pretty good, drinkable wine that sold in the United States in those days for three dollars a bottle, and it was a very good wine for three dollars a bottle. So they were getting into that. They had some industry. They never had industry before the Marxists took over, but if you're going to have a proletariat you have to have industry, so they during the Stalin era sort of force-fed, created heavy industry which by the time I was there basically had badly deteriorated. The steel works and chemical works and so forth produced far more pollution than they did steel or chemicals. They did employ a lot of people. They produced forklift trucks, for some reason, within the CMEA. They were given a specialization for producing forklift trucks and certain relatively simple, early, small computer systems, and they did those sorts of things. Particularly the forklift trucks were more successful than the small computers. They did sell some of those around the world. And they seemed to have a specialty in doing civil engineering projects and construction. So what they tended to do was to export agricultural commodities. They had large hothouses for doing winter vegetables. They were able to sell those in places like Germany and particularly Greece. They were able to export some of those hothouse tomatoes and things like that in the wintertime. But you're right when you say tobacco was a big deal and the attar of rose for the perfume industry. I think that was virtually all exported to the French - and the wine and, as I say, the forklift trucks and the Bulgarian engineers for construction projects. They used to send a lot of their other stuff that they couldn't really sell on the Western markets, of course, off to the Soviet Union. I guess that's where a lot of their wine went, a lot of their inferior beer maybe, and in return they got back most significantly petroleum. They got back petroleum at below-world-market prices, and then this became a significant economic subsidy to Bulgarian economy. I guess it was a reflection of their political loyalty, but they were able to get such a quota of Soviet petroleum at below prices or in barter arrangements, more than what their national needs were for petroleum, so they would then either turn around and re-export the Soviet petroleum or they would re-export petroleum products refined from the Soviet petroleum, and they got considerable hard currency for that.

Q: How about the role of the Soviet embassy and all that when you were there?

CASWELL: Well, it was a huge place, and we suspected that they were extremely well plugged in and in effect, if not necessarily running the country, were well informed as to what was going on at all levels of the country both politically and economically. But it was a very large place. I never set foot in it.

Q: Who was the leader in Bulgaria while you were there?

CASWELL: Todor Zhivkov. He had been in power for a real long time. I'm not sure exactly when he first began to emerge in a triumvirate, but by about 1954 or '56 he had pretty much jettisoned Mr. Chervenkov, who was his leading rival, and he was pretty much numero uno and he basically was in power until the wall came down.

Q: In '89.

CASWELL: In '89. There was a time lag before the Communist regime fell in Bulgaria.

Q: '90.

CASWELL: Yes, about the early '90s. He lasted until '90 or '91 or so.

Q: Did you all spend much time sort of playing criminology, who's doing what, who's staying on top of Dimitrov's Tomb, too, and on May Day and that sort of thing, figuring out what was what within the party? That came with the Eastern European circuit in those days, I guess.

CASWELL: Exactly, because you were very much into reading the tea leaves, as it were. One of the less enjoyable aspects of my job was being an assiduous reader of *Rabotnichesko Delo*, the *Workers' Cause*, which we used to refer to in our cables as just RD. The Brits, I found out, in their cables called it Rab Del, which was even better; we should have used that. But it was a really boring, turgid, ugly newspaper written in the most arcane, formulaic, stilted language, and it seemed we would just sometimes read the same stuff over and over. The articles just seemed to go on and on, and they were largely the same. You had to try to find little differences. We had the 12th Party Congress when I was working in the country, and party congresses were a big opportunity to try to get insights in the changes in the pecking order, who's up and who's down and what might be the implications for policy coming out of all of this. But you would go to the May Day parade, and the ninth of September, which was Bulgarian independence day, the anniversary day that they were liberated by the Red Army. In those two days there would be the kind of standard parade in front of Dimitrov's tomb and listen to the speeches and see who's standing up on the podium and that kind of thing. But apart from that, the party congresses were your best opportunity. Yes, essentially Zhivkov, one of his standard tactics was to be constantly reshuffling people in the cabinet to, I guess, keep people off balance and in theory to bring in some new blood with some new ideas. He always seemed to be trying to strike a balance between old-guard guys that had been with him for a long time and maybe represented important constituencies among the old guard and the party, people who were in good odor with the Soviets and thought that was a strategic relationship for them, but also trying to bring in some

younger technocratic people particularly in the economic ministries to try to make the economy a little bit more dynamic or responsive or whatever. In the latter group there were some people, like there was man named Ognyan Doinov and Andre Lukanov who, while certainly to all outward appearances were died-in-the-wool Marxist-Leninists, but they were of a younger generation, they were more, particularly Lukanov, cosmopolitan and aware of the outside world beyond the Soviet orbit. Lukanov was very fluent in English and French. He was kind of like the point guy in the Politburo for dealing with Westerners, trying to encourage investment or trade, this type of thing, and Doinov was a little bit of a heavier type but he also seemed to be sharper, more intelligent than the average in terms of making the system work. So the communist leaders weren't all knuckle draggers, but there were certainly those elements, too.

Q: Did you get any feel for the increasing stagnation of the Soviet Union which was going on? I'm not sure when Brezhnev died, but he was getting towards the end of his time, and the invasion of Afghanistan was sort of the last gasp of a very stupid move on the part of that Brezhnev group and all. But anyway, it was a time when the Soviets were really going downhill.

CASWELL: Yes, we certainly had that impression. I would say we had that impression more from what we saw going on in the Soviet Union and the succession of funerals, Brezhnev and then Chernenko, Andropov, and they were dropping off like... That seemed like it was one of George Bush's major jobs in the Reagan administration, going to funerals in Moscow. The other obvious sign of malaise, in effect, was what was going on in Poland, which was something that we were watching very much asking ourselves would the contagion spread. Look what was going on in Poland; was the Soviet Union going to do anything about it? Were they or weren't they? And what were the Polish authorities going to do, and how much were they being pressed by the Soviets? Or how much did the Soviets trust them to resolve it locally? Did the Soviets trust them to resolve it locally because they had to or because they really did trust their judgment or whatever? But in terms of what was going on in Bulgarian-Soviet relations or happening in Bulgaria that we could attribute to the malaise and problems in the Soviet Union? No, not really. I think we understood or we felt, from what they said and what we understood about the petroleum connection that I had talked about before, the petroleum subsidy, if you will, to the entire Bulgarian economy, that this relationship to the Bulgarian leadership was very, very important. They understood that they needed that subsidy, that those economic relations were very important. They were trying to find ways of opening up their economy a little bit or being able to trade more with the West, encourage Western visitors to come to the tourism facilities that I talked about before. They recognized the need for the Bulgarian economy on its own to be able to earn more hard currency because maybe they were looking down the road to the day when the Soviet economic subsidy wouldn't be there. But whenever Soviet leaders would come to visit, the Bulgarians were real apple polishers and they were all the time talking about the wonderful economic relationship and how vital this was to Bulgaria. They clearly were hoping that it would never end, but yes, I think they probably had been warned by the Soviets that, "Hey, we can't go on helping you this way indefinitely, and you guys are going to have to learn to grow your economy a little bit," and that's part of why people like Lukanov and Doinov rose to some prominence in the Politburo, because they were seen as guys that maybe could deliver some improvements to the Bulgarian economy.

Q: On the military side, we were still in confrontation. Bulgaria, I assume, was a member of the Warsaw Pact.

CASWELL: Oh, yes.

Q: What role did we see Bulgaria playing? What was considered the Bulgarian military threat?

CASWELL: My recollection of DAO briefings and so forth was that we didn't have a terribly high opinion of the Bulgarian military as a force projection agent. What we understood their role to be would be was to in effect hold, maybe try to make some small incursions along the borders into northern Greece or, more likely, a thrust towards the straits into European Turkey or even conceivably to Yugoslavia if that were the need, but that they weren't expected to do the job alone, not for very long. The contingency we understood was that the Soviets would by air and also across the Black Sea through naval units, would send their units down into Bulgarian territory and then Soviet forces operating through Bulgarian territory, either jointly or whatever with Bulgarian forces, would really do the job and push through to seize Istanbul or whatever the immediate objectives were.

Q: When you left there, were you entranced by the Balkans, or how did you feel about this excursion?

CASWELL: I found the place kind of fascinating. I liked it. It was not an easy place to live. It was hard on my wife.

Q: You'd gotten married?

CASWELL: I'd gotten married. It was particularly hard on my wife. I think it was hard on many, if not all, wives. The husbands tended to be overemployed, preoccupied, working all the time or much of their time, because it was a difficult environment to work in. And the wives for the most part were totally unemployed or underemployed. The American embassy was making efforts to try to create jobs or part-time jobs for different spouses, but there wasn't that much. There was the community liaison officer position and there were some part-time jobs helping out in the admin section or whatever, but there wasn't too much. I think it put a lot of stress on families. Also, there wasn't that much available in terms of a local school for Western children. There was what was called the Anglo-American School which was available up through eighth grade, so many times people with older children had to send them off to boarding school, which could be another additional stress. It was a hard place to live in in that way, but in terms of the country and the kind of work we were doing, I thought it was interesting, it was intriguing. It was hard to get things accomplished, but when you did get a little nugget of truth out of it all, it was rewarding. It was a small enough place that as a relatively junior officer in my early 30s I was a relatively big fish in a small pond there. I got to be acting DCM several times, and one time I was actually the virtual chargé. I don't remember exactly, but my recollection was that the ambassador was on vacation, was out of the country, and the DCM was either also on vacation out of the country or he was someplace else still in the country but he wasn't available. For one day I was it, and on that one day, believe it or not, ex-President Nixon came to visit. Maybe both the ambassador and the DCM decided to be away because former President Nixon was going to

visit, but I was involved very much in the preparations for his visit. The Bulgarian officials were absolutely pleased as punch that the great Nixon, the great proponent of detente who attached a lot of importance to the U.S.-Soviet relationship, the pioneer of visiting China and so forth would actually deign to visit Bulgaria and sit down and talk about world affairs with Todor Zhivkov. They just thought this was the most wonderful thing in the world. I'd never seen secret service agents so happy in my life. We've all dealt with other presidential visits, and secret service agents could be kind of overbearing and demanding and saying, "You've got to do this, you've got to do that," and the local security people or whatever would sometimes raise hackles up and say, "No, no, no, we don't do that this way in our country," but whatever the secret service wanted in Bulgaria they got, no question. It was as though they were on the same wave length with the local authorities. It was very relaxed because basically Nixon was traveling alone. He had maybe one or two personal assistants, and the secret service delegation was really rather relaxed and the advance team was relaxed and basically it went very, very smoothly, but it was kind of the opportunity to be out there at the head of the receiving line at the airport as the acting chargé for the day.

Q: How about relations with Romania? Ceausescu had been there for a long time.

CASWELL: I don't think their relations were particularly close. They had some bilateral irritations that for the most part related to pollution-type issues along the Danube border and feelings that Bulgarian chemical plants, the fumes, were wafting over to the Romanian side and damaging crops. Bulgaria had a nuclear power plant which was up on an island in the Danube, and there had been some suggestions that it was not well maintained and dangerous, which subsequently later on became confirmed big time. By the '90s everybody knew that this was a very problematical power plant, and after Chernobyl, people were worried that this plant might be the next one to go. But there were some concerns even back in that time period about that. But aside from those sorts of things, I think basically Zhivkov ran his show in Bulgaria and Ceausescu ran his and they sort of mutually respected each other and stayed out of each other's affairs.

Q: Was Yugoslavia...

CASWELL: Actually I neglected to mention the Yugoslav embassy when I was talking before about other embassies. They also we considered to be quite well informed. You could sort of consider them, I guess, honorary Westerners.

Q: Well, they often acted this role, particularly during the Cold War, as being one of our most, in a way, dependable - information's not the right term - people who knew their way around and would talk rather straightforward.

CASWELL: Exactly. When you were looking for somebody to talk to and bounce an idea off - the ambassador would have monthly luncheons with the Yugoslav ambassador - it would be a satisfying conversation. It wasn't just one sided where you were telling them things; you could actually learn things in return. And because of their historic relationships as neighbors and so forth, they seemed to understand a little bit better what was going on in Bulgaria and help us with sorting out. We knew what happened, but why did it happen and what was significant about

it and what was really behind it. You had to be aware that many times the Yugoslavs had axes to grind and a peculiar lens that they were looking at these things through, so you had to sometimes take it with a grain of salt or put your own analysis on their analysis. But I think they were useful people to talk to, and the relationship between the two countries, there would periodically be meetings between senior Bulgarian and Yugoslav officials and publicly there was a lot of “We’re brothers and we love each other, and everything is hunky-dory,” but you always had the impression that maybe things weren’t quite as rosy as what they were saying. But other than, as I say, the periodic little things about Macedonia, which they basically sort of agreed to disagree when they had these bilateral meetings and just sort of said, “Well, we’ll just put this off to the side, and we don’t want this to get in the way of better relations.” ‘Better relations’ usually meant in these meetings “How can we improve trade? Are there any opportunities for joint ventures? How can we together find inroads into Western markets and find ways to earn hard currency?” I think these Bulgarians sort of saw the Yugoslavs as pioneers in that way and maybe they could learn a few things from the Yugoslavs. What the Yugoslavs thought they could learn from the Bulgarians I don’t know.

Q: I guess we pretty well touched most bases. Is there anything else we should talk about?

CASWELL: That’s pretty much it.

Q: When Ronald Reagan came in, he was known as an extreme-right movie actor and all this sort of thing. How was that played while you were there?

CASWELL: The press would blast Reagan and mock him and his speeches about the evil empire and so forth. The propaganda people had a heyday because they just felt that Reagan was just the ultimate hypocrite and dangerous warmongering cowboy that was going to set off an international conflagration and destroy the world, irresponsible and a fool. Yes, he was a favorite sort of target of the propagandists. We didn’t have too many visitors when I was in Bulgaria. Whenever I was working places where we had lots and lots of visitors, I would sometimes harken back to the “halcyon days” in Sofia when almost nobody came to visit. We had two one-man CODELs come to Sofia in the entire two years that I was there, and ironically they both showed up at the same time. Frank Shakespeare from the U.S. Information Agency came, and we had Assistant Secretary Eagleburger came one time for a visit. At the foreign ministry they were just pleased as punch to think that an assistant secretary of European affairs would actually come visit Bulgaria. Other than that, I don’t really remember having very many visitors. We were not very high up on people’s radar scopes back in Washington. I sometimes wondered when we sent back our cables whether anybody actually read them. I found that, when I came back to Washington, indeed in certain circles there were people who regularly read what we wrote and we were the voice, the authoritative voice on what was going on in Bulgaria and why it was going on and what it might mean and what it might not mean. But when you were actually out there working, you felt you were at the end of a very long telephone line.

Q: Was there any university in the United States that sort of had Bulgarian studies? Cornell used to be for Indonesia.

CASWELL: No, I'm afraid not really. I think there were some communities in Ohio and around the Pittsburgh area where there were people who had originally come out from Bulgaria back in the 19th century or whatever, but there wasn't a real locus of Bulgarian-American community, and it didn't manifest itself in any prestigious university program as a center for Bulgarian studies.

JOSEPH R. MCGHEE
Bulgaria Desk Officer
Washington, DC (1981-1982)

Joseph R. McGhee was born in Pennsylvania in 1952 and educated at Yale and Columbia. He entered the Foreign Service in 1975. His career included posts in Prague, Rome, Panama City and Bonn. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1997.

Q: *You left in '81 whither?*

McGHEE: I came back to Washington and became the Bulgarian desk officer.

Q: *You were doing that from '81 to when?*

McGHEE: I did that from '81 to '82. Actually I had Bulgaria and I was the assistant desk officer for Yugoslavia. In early '82 they reorganized the office which at that time was called EUR-EE. It became EEY and it's been divided up now. I took over as Yugoslav desk officer and someone else, a junior officer, came in and took Bulgaria in '82.

Q: *So you did that from '82 to?*

McGHEE: '82 to '83.

Q: *Let's talk first about from '81 to '82 when you were Bulgaria desk officer. Bulgaria seldom becomes even a blip on American radar. During '81 to '82 what were American concerns in Bulgaria and any developments at that time?*

McGHEE: '81 to '82 was still in the high life of the Todor Zhivkov regime in Bulgaria and it was early in the Reagan administration. The Reagan administration began a policy towards Eastern Europe that was known as differentiation. The idea of it was supposed to be that to the extent that the Eastern Europeans (I'm talking about Warsaw Pact members in particular) differentiated themselves from Moscow, they would receive more attention and better treatment from the United States. This is why we got to be close to the Ceausescu regime in Romania. Ceausescu was viewed as being, whatever else he was, semi-independent from Moscow and able to pursue his own line. To a lesser extent, but to some extent, we got closer to the Poles as well. And that's also why things were so bad with the Czechoslovak and also with the Bulgarians.

Bulgaria, I would guess, was the less differentiated of all the East European regimes and therefore by the logic of this policy it would be treated the least well by the administration. In fact it was very hard to do anything because in order for this degree of differentiation to be really perceived by the East Europeans, you needed to have someone that you were pounding and we just pounded the crap out of the poor Bulgarians.

Q: They were easy to do.

McGHEE: In the middle of this of course came this revelation that supposedly the Bulgarians had hired this Turkish hit man Mehmet Ali Ağca to assassinate the Pope.

Q: The Pope was wounded but not killed.

McGHEE: Yes. He was wounded in an assassination attempt in St. Peter's Square, I believe, in 1981 by this Turk. There was some evidence that came to the attention of the Italian authorities that Bulgaria was involved. It was very difficult to pin down just the extent of this involvement because of the way that the Soviets divided up tasks with their Warsaw Pact allies. The Bulgars clearly did have a special mission to concentrate on Turkey and I mean not merely gathering information but also contributing to the destabilization of Turkey.

People don't remember anymore but at that time in the early 1980s Turkey was in great chaos. The great gray wolves, which was Ali Ağca's organization, were far right wing, well armed and supplied with funds. They were fighting with Deb Sol and other leftist organizations in the street. Virtually every day there were incidents of political violence in Turkey and eventually the Turkish army stepped in.

Ali Ağca was sprung from prison and smuggled out of Turkey. Evidently he did spend some time in Bulgaria en route to Western Europe and may have even received money and other assistance from the Bulgarian government to get him to Western Europe. The question that arises and remains open is did the Bulgarians also bring him to Rome and tell him to shoot the Pope or did they just intend to put him on ice in Western Europe in hopes that one day they would be able to reinsert him into Turkey and allow him to continue sowing mayhem in Turkey which was what he had done? I don't think anyone knows the answer to that question. Ali Ağca is still in prison in Italy and is likely to continue to be for some time to come.

It is not clear to me that the Bulgarians really had anything to gain from having the Pope assassinated. In the view of the Warsaw Pact at that time, the Pope was a Polish question. I'm not sure that they really viewed him as enough of a threat to run this kind of a risk, but there is not much doubt in my mind that the Bulgarian authorities did help this man to get to Western Europe, but I think that their ultimate goal was that he would be able to go back to Turkey and continue his career of political violence in Turkey which is what he was up to.

Q: You were on the Bulgarian desk when the Reagan administration was just getting in, this being a right wing in the American political spectrum coming in. Did you feel sort of almost a mandate that we had to be kind of tougher and take a harder view of Bulgaria or anything like

that?

McGHEE: No, there was no need for me to propagandize. The view of Bulgaria was already so hard that there was no work to be done in that. I didn't have to go around telling people to be hard on the Bulgarians. In fact what was really needed was to occasionally find the odd opportunity to do something useful or constructive with the Bulgarians and they didn't come very often.

We had the Bulgarian Symphony Orchestra come to Washington and do a couple of performances at the Kennedy Center. The concert which I went to wasn't very well attended. It was a very good orchestra. They performed two pieces. One of them was a Mendelssohn piece and the other was a piece by a Bulgarian composer named Vladigerov and it was entitled in the program as *Bulgarian Rhapsody Vardar*. Vardar is a river. I am sitting there with my wife flipping through the program notes and I said to her something like I didn't know the Vardar River went into Bulgaria, I thought it was further west? And she said well who cares. So we sat through the thing and it was quite enjoyable and the orchestra was very good.

The next day I got a preemptory call to get up to Eagleburger's office right away. He was Under Secretary for Political Affairs at that time. The Yugoslav ambassador, whose name was Bugimere Lonshar, (we used to call him Bud,) he was up there ahead of me and was waving around the program from this Bulgarian concert and a map. We consulted the map together and I was right, the Vardar River in fact didn't go anywhere near Bulgaria. It was about 50 miles over and completely in Yugoslavia. Of course to the Yugoslavs this was a provocation because this was the Bulgarians asserting their claim to Macedonia. Why did we let this happen? Didn't we check the notes at the Kennedy Center? Of course we all go troop into Eagleburger and Eagleburger didn't want to just sit there.

Q: He had been ambassador to Yugoslavia. Larry and I took Serbian together so he knew the Macedonian question and the sensitivities.

McGHEE: In fact being the Yugoslav desk officer in those days was really just being an assistant to Eagleburger. Anyways he would periodically turn to me and say "did you know this?" I said I was at the concert. Lonshar had had somebody sitting in the concert too. Eagleburger finally said well I don't know what we can do about it. Everyone was pretty ticked off with the Bulgarians for messing around like that.

Q: If I recall, wasn't it around this time that there were books on terrorism and the Bulgarian? The Bulgarians had already killed somebody in London with a poisoned umbrella. So they were perceived as the center of something.

McGHEE: It was an umbrella that had a little gas canister in the point that shot this tiny little pellet with poison in it out the tip. They walked up behind this guy whose name I believe was Federov on the street or in the underground or something and just jabbed him in the back of the leg and this tiny pellet went in. He wasn't immediately poisoned. He wasn't stricken on the spot. He got sick over a couple days and died rather slowly and painfully as I recall. They attempted it on someone else in Paris or Vienna. That person also got sick but they didn't get the pellet right

into the blood vessel that time so he recovered. Federov worked for the BBC Bulgarian service and they were after him for that reason.

Q: This made Bulgaria well known, notorious I guess.

McGHEE: To the extent that anyone knew about it, they were notorious but the fact is that people just didn't know. It was difficult to get anyone to take it seriously. This was the big frustration. For some issue, the precise nature of which I do not recall right now, the Bulgarian ambassador here, Julev, needed to come down and see Eagleburger on a Saturday morning. Eagleburger agreed because he was going to be in anyway but the timing was very tight. The ambassador was asked to be here at ten a.m. sharp and we'll do what we have to do in half an hour. Ten a.m. rolls around, no Julev, no Julev, no Julev, and Eagleburger, as Eagleburger was one to do, said well the hell with him and disappeared. He said you send me a note on Monday morning and tell me why they aren't here.

Eleven o'clock Julev shows up downstairs. I had been calling around and I couldn't find him, etc., etc. He shows up down at the main entrance to the State Department. I went down and said, "Eagleburger is gone. Where were you? All this urgency and you don't show up." It turns out that it was right when daylight savings time had changed and not only had the Bulgarians neglected to turn their clocks back but they had gone the whole week without realizing that their clocks were an hour off. Right here in the middle of Washington they managed not to know. Because they only saw each other they were all on time. They were all working off the same time.

Q: What about drug trafficking? Was that a problem because they had these big international trucks on legitimate travel to Europe that used to go from Turkey up through Bulgaria and parts of Yugoslavia?

McGHEE: There was intense suspicion. In my time nothing was proven although everyone was pretty sure. It wasn't so much drug trafficking as it was the sort of thing that Noriega did in Panama which was allowing these people to use the national territory as a platform for moving their stuff along. The Bulgarians, as far as I know, and this may have changed later on, were mainly concerned in getting a rake-off. Stuff could move through but the Bulgarians had to be paid.

They handled this all through these enormous state companies that existed there and were into all sorts of things. Some of them handled transportation and this was essentially how it was done. They were brought in through special arrangements and they weren't bothered by security or customs coming or going. They were allowed to go out the other side but they paid. I think that was the main point. There was no enforcement on Bulgarian territory.

Q: Were you under orders to try to do something about this? Did you make representation?

McGHEE: We did do some things in Sofia, less here although at one point the Justice Department was in touch with them about increasing cooperation. This was also the downside of the differentiation policy which was that it was difficult for us to work so hard to keep the

Bulgarians in the doghouse and then go to them and ask them to give us special cooperation on this issue and terrorism. We did kind of hold out the prospect that things might improve if they were more cooperative and if they cracked down on drugs moving through Bulgarian territory. Every once in a while there would be an arrest. Frankly I think they were shrewd enough to see what the lay of the land was here and that it was going to take nothing short of a democratic revolution in Sofia to get Bulgaria out of the doghouse so why bother.

Q: Was there much trade with Bulgaria at all? I always think of the attar of roses or whatever that is used for.

McGHEE: That's right. That is a cash crop in Bulgaria. There is a valley of the roses somewhere out in the central highlands around Plovdiv and they grow roses there and extract the essence for perfume companies so it is big business. They grow some wine. It is kind of a Mediterranean climate and Bulgarian food is very Mediterranean. It is more like Greek food than it is like Northern European food. A big part of their diet is based on yogurt. Yogurt apparently is a traditionally thing. Bulgars originally came from Central Asia and they fermented the yogurt in their saddle bags as they pounded across the steppes. The embassy used to give me every year for Christmas a yogurt culture for me to make my own yogurt. I never quite got the hang of it but I was a little bit suspicious anyway their reputation being what it was.

The other thing was we had this long and involved story here with the embassy. They occupied a building on 16th Street that used to be an ice cream factory; that was their chancery. It was in a dangerous neighborhood and they were constantly being mugged coming and going from the building. They wanted to move and build a new chancery up on Connecticut Avenue where all these embassies are, that kind of diplomatic park there next to UDC, University of the District of Columbia. But along with the spot that the Russian embassy occupies on Wisconsin Avenue, that is the highest point in the District. The CIA and the Pentagon insisted that they did not want the Bulgarians up there looking down on all of their microwave communications. The Bulgarians didn't want to go anywhere else.

They leased the building on 16th Street from a real estate company that sold it to a private developer. He wanted to turn it into a condo but we had to get the Bulgarians out first. Their lease was up and they weren't paying any rent because they wanted the State Department to find them a building that they could move into. Our attitude was it's not our business to find you a building. You go find yourself a building and do it quick because you are trespassing on this man's property.

This developer was getting madder and madder and madder and at one point he went to some Pinkerton or Allied Detective Agency and hired himself a swat team. He was going to go in there and kick down the door and throw them all out. Of course I had to get the legal division out of bed in the middle of the night to get a restraining order to stop this guy from invading diplomatic premises but in the meantime the Bulgars just dragged their feet and dragged their feet. They didn't have any money is what it boils down to. Eventually after about a year and a half, this had started even before I got there, they finally did get a building that the Israelis had given up over on Florida Avenue and I believe they are still there. They have never gotten their palace up on

Connecticut Avenue.

JONATHAN B. RICKERT
Deputy Chief of Mission
Sofia (1985-1988)

Jonathan Rickert was born and raised in Washington, DC and educated at Princeton and Yale Universities. After service in the US Army, he joined the Foreign Service in 1963, serving tours in both Washington and abroad. His foreign posts include London, Moscow, Port au Spain, Sofia and Bucharest, where he served as Deputy Chief of Mission. In his Washington assignments Mr. Rickert dealt primarily with Eastern and Central European Affairs. Mr. Rickert was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2002.

Q: Could you say anything about in this period, the early '70s, Romania's relationships with its immediate neighbors; Hungary, Bulgaria?

RICKERT: Yeah. I was struck by the degree to which Romanians were totally ignorant of Bulgaria. I served later in Bulgaria so I had the chance to see the same phenomenon from the same perspective. I often remarked that Romanians knew a lot more about the U.S. than they knew about Bulgaria and I found out later that the Bulgarians knew a lot more about say, the Federal Republic of Germany than they knew about Romania despite the fact that they were members of the same comicon, Warsaw Pact.

Q: Okay. Anything else about the desk officer job? If not, where did you go next?

RICKERT: Toward the middle of my last year, I was assigned as DCM in Sofia, Bulgaria via foreign language training. This was before DCM committees, and the assignment was made between our office director who, I believe it would have been Dick Holmes at that time. John Davis was the first, and then Dick Holmes was the next. The DAS, Mark Palmer, it was done in-house, so it was a lot easier particularly on severely underbid posts like Sofia where there were about a dozen bidders where half of them were not at grade or had no discernable background. So at the end of my tours as desk officer, I went to language training over at FSI and studied Bulgarian for a year. I did master it fairly well and used it extensively in Bulgaria.

Q: You went to Sofia in the summer of 1985. Who was the ambassador?

RICKERT: Ambassador when I arrived was Mel Levitsky, and he was there for over a year. And then there was a gap for a few months, and then Sol Polansky came. That was, of course, a major step forward from a career point of view. I had not had a significant supervisory position up to that point and was thrown into a DCM job in a relatively small embassy. But still, anybody who's been DCM knows the joys and travails of that particular job anywhere, but I thoroughly

enjoyed it. Joe Lake was my immediate predecessor, and we overlapped for two days, and he gave me the combination to the safe and showed me where the office men's room was, and said, "I'm here if you need me, but this post is too small for two DCM's."

Q: Even for two days!

RICKERT: Even for two days, but you're it! So that was my being thrown off the back of the canoe which I think was the right way to do it, but at the time it seemed a little scary. He had been there for three years, and Mel Levitsky had already been there for well over a year, I believe. Certainly over a year, so he was well settled in, and I was the new guy who had to learn everything from scratch. There were a couple of interesting people – well, there were many interesting people at the embassy – but the one that went on to the greatest fame was Mike Hayden who was our air attaché. Mike was a major in the Air Force, a very impressive military person who is currently the head of NSA, three star, so he's had a good career. Having worked with him, even traveled with him in country, I can see why. Also, Lyn Dent was the admin officer. We'd served together in Trinidad earlier, and it was a delight to have such an exceptionally competent admin officer for the first year that I was there. There were some other folks: John Beyrle who was a junior officer and is now DCM in Moscow, and some other very capable folks. It was kind of the farm team for Moscow or a place people went to after Moscow. John had come from Moscow, so it was a good team and a pleasure to work with him. Housing was a problem in Sofia. It was some of the worst in Europe at that time. There were Soviet era apartments which were relatively small and not very well built and not very efficient, and they were all the same size. So whether you were Colonel Masterson with his five kids or a single secretary, you got the same size apartment. Interestingly, there was almost no complaining about housing. I attribute that to the fact that there was equal mistreatment for all. At a later time, when I visited Sofia from Bucharest and talked with the DCM there, she told me that housing was the biggest problem – one of the biggest problems. By then the market had opened up and some people had very nice houses, and others were still living in the crummy Soviet era apartments, and that led to problems that we didn't have to face when I was there. My family and I lived in a new building... I'll go back in a moment. About a year before I got there inspectors looked at the chancery and said that if there were a fire, the Marines who were living on the top floor of the chancery building at the time would be incinerated. There would be no way that they could escape. The embassy went quickly to work on finding a new Marine house. The eventual solution that they came up with was a building in a diplomatic enclave on the outskirts of town that was built by the Bulgarians as ambassadors' residences, or at least their idea of what an ambassador's residence should be like. The Marines got one floor at the bottom, and then there was the multi-purpose room which could be used by the embassy for various events and activities. And then there was a DCM apartment on the top floor which had all the quirks and foibles of Bulgarian architecture but was very spacious by local standards and had balconies all the way around and a lovely view of Mount Vitosha. We were on that side of Sofia. It had four bedrooms and was very nice, indeed, in most respects. It was about a half hour from the ski slopes on Mount Vitosha, and about 45 minutes or so from the embassy villa in Borovets, an even better skiing location, and the air was a bit cleaner on the edge of town than it was down in the center of town.

Q: It was all right to share a building with the Marines?

RICKERT: A number of pluses, a few minuses. The Marines were wonderful to our kids who were in grade school at the time, and there was a very strict non-frat policy. These were young guys who were bored. They had very few people to socialize with, and a couple of the Marines were particularly nice to our kids: took them to the zoo, taught them how to play pool and various other things. The only problem, of course, was noise. We had a rule that after 10:00 music had to go down, and for the most part it was observed. It wasn't really a problem. The building itself I thought looked like a modern minimum security correctional facility. It was not exactly attractive or welcoming, but it was a lot better than what a lot of other people had at that time.

Q: I'm glad you didn't have to move into the Marines former quarters on the top floor of the chancery! I thought maybe that's what you were going to say!

RICKERT: No, no. I might say my biggest concern when I was there was fire because of the Lonetree incident that happened in Moscow. All the security arms in the U. S. government discovered there were security problems in embassies throughout the region. Our chancery was – and is as we speak – still in a building that has Bulgarian buildings on both sides. The Bulgarian *der ja mesigernas*, state security, was very aggressive. They bored holes through the walls, and they did all sorts of nasty things. Our security people were concerned about technical and other penetrations, and I was concerned about fire because there was one staircase in the building, straight down the center of the building.

Q: And that was all.

RICKERT: And that was it. And the ambassador's office. The ambassador's and DCM's offices were, I think, on the fourth floor, maybe the fifth floor, but if there were fire down below, it would be a long jump down to the pavement. So these teams that came through were appalled by the security situation and tut-tutted. And ambassadors for years had been complaining about this without any result. But they did do some security upgrades and started getting serious about finding a site for a new chancery which is due to be opened about a year from now. I saw it this past summer when I was on TDY in Bulgaria, and it was something those of us who served back then could only have dreamed about. Its on 10 plus acres, brand new modern earthquake proof...

Q: Decent location in terms of the city?

RICKERT: Excellent location in terms of the city. It's in the city. It's not downtown, but its not far from the downtown areas, and its in a very good area. I don't know all the details on how we got that site, but I'm sure there are a number of other embassies who are building new chanceries that would like to have something as accessible and as well situated as that one is. It was not a good period in U. S.-Bulgarian relations for several reasons. The approximate cause for the problems was a campaign that was launched by the Zhukov lead Communist regime early in 1985. It started early on, if I recall correctly, to change the names of those who were Turkish to Bulgarian names. The regime decided that these people were all actually Bulgarians who had been turned into Turks by the ottomans during their nearly 500 years of oppression of Bulgaria. So the only decent thing was to turn them back into Bulgarians, and they did this in a very

rigorous and oppressive way. They decided what the names of the Turks should be, and they did things like naming Imams "Christo" which is Christ. This is not only an insult of having your name changed but having the principal figure of another religion imposed on you and other things like that. We strongly objected to this and criticized it in public and in private. The second aspect, of course, is that Bulgaria was often seen as the 16th Republic of the Soviet Union and the most slavishly pro-Soviet of all the satellite countries. My view is a little bit different from that of many people in this regard. I can't prove it, but I think the Bulgarians certainly didn't dislike the Russians or the Soviets. They owe them a huge historical debt because of their liberation back in the 1800's with the help of the Russian army, Alexander III I believe it was. But I don't think they especially loved the Russians more than anyone else. Russia, or the Soviet Union, represented to them security, and it represented economic possibility. I think they found that they could get what they wanted by saying the right things and doing the right things at relatively low cost, and it made the Russians happy, and it gave them significant economic advantages, and why not? They really didn't have a whole lot of other choice. They could have resisted to an extent the way Ceausescu did and pay the price, but they ended up living a lot better than the Romanians did, and I think they were being quite opportunistic. They got oil at comicon prices, and refined it, and sold it at world prices, and they had a number of other economic advantages that were well worth voting the right way at the UN all the time and a few other slavish things like that. Although it was startling to see signs of billboards occasionally in Bulgaria that said *slava kapay ess ess*, "Praise to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union". You never see that in other Eastern European countries, but in Bulgaria you did. A small price to pay. There wasn't a whole lot going on in U. S.-Bulgarian relations as a result of these two factors. There were certain hints of change in the air. Of course, Gorbachev was in. There was talk of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika*. Zhivkov, the Bulgarian dictator, was in his 70's, and it was interesting how he tried to adapt to the new realities in Moscow. Gorbachev came to Bulgaria once, at least once, while I was there. Although one doesn't know what the sources were, the indications from people associated with the visit were that Zhivkov and Gorbachev had not hit it off that well, and it was a real generational difference. There were ideological difference presumably, and Bulgarians put a good show on and claimed everything was just great, but it wasn't. Things weren't as smooth as they might have been. There were small signs, very small signs, that things were changing. In hindsight one can see that there was no resistance and no dissidence of any significance in Bulgaria. In the latter part of my time there was some ecological movements, and that enabled people, even party members, to take stands not entirely in accord with those of the party and state. It was all done on a very high level of maintaining ecology and so forth and never pointed directly at anybody. But it was a sign of independent thinking of action that hadn't been present before. These types of activities eventually turned into the parties, the core of the post-'89 governments. John Whitehead, who was Deputy Secretary of State was commissioned in effect by Secretary Shultz to look after Eastern Europe. In the latter part of my time he came twice to Bulgaria. He used to make a swing through the area, trying to do it every six months. I don't think he managed to keep to that schedule entirely, but I know he came twice. This was interesting because he was, of course, a very charming man. He was not at all unwilling to give a straight message, but he did it very nicely. An interesting little sideline on his visits: He is a cousin of my mother's. I had not really met him before, but he knew who I was. My mother had stayed with his family for vacations when she was in college. She had looked after John's parents when they were elderly and living in the same town in Connecticut and had helped, had seen them, and kind of made sure that they were okay and so forth, which he appreciated. The

first time that he came to Bulgaria, he got off the plane, and I was there with the others, and he gave me a big hug and said, "Hello, cousin!" and the Bulgarians were all eyes and ears about that. The second time he came, we were having a very difficult time at the school, and I was Chairman of the School Board. We had a school director and his wife who were both aggressive evangelical Christians. The Bulgarians had told us that they had to go because apparently they were carrying their activities beyond the narrow confines of the foreign community. I didn't often play this kind of game, but by then they knew that Whitehead was related to me. I said, in preparations for the visit when they told me we had to get rid of Mr. and Mrs. Kauffman, I said, "Well, this is an important matter for us, and it would be unfortunate if Mr. Whitehead and I talked to him and he had to raise it with Zhivkov." And that was the last we ever heard of it, so they finished out their time. You have to use everything at your disposal when you're dealing with that type of situation. One little incident about John Whitehead: One of the times Zhivkov gave a luncheon for him at a place, it was an official palace called the Boyana Palace where they did official entertaining. It was not a residential place. It was a grand barn of a place, a Communist dictator's idea of what a presidential palace should look like. Not on a Ceausescu palace scale, but still some of the same mentality went into it. There was a large table for the luncheon that was about eight feet wide, and Zhivkov was on one side and Whitehead on the other side, and footmen running around with white gloves on. Whitehead had many glasses for the Bulgarian wines and so forth that were to be served which were very good, and as note taker, I was forced to only take a sip of each one, but Mr. Whitehead complimented Mr. Zhivkov on the excellent wine, and Zhivkov responded – I'll never forget – said, "People tell me that our wines are very good, and I'm sure its true, but he said, "As for me, I can tell the difference between red and white and no further than that." And when I think of Zhivkov whom I met with on a number of occasions and Ceausescu whom I never met with but saw on a number of occasions, to me a very important difference between the two was that Zhivkov had the ability to laugh at himself which is rare in dictators. He could tell stories like that without feeling embarrassed whereas Ceausescu had to know everything and be all-knowing and all wise. Zhivkov could say, "Oh, actually I prefer beer." And during the lunch a footman with white gloves came and poured beer out of the can into his glass, crystal glass that he had. It was all rather strange! Another visitor that we had who came twice was Tom Lantos.

Q: Congressman from California.

RICKERT: California.

Q: Hungary.

RICKERT: Right. Hungarian-Jewish origin, one of the best informed, interested U.S. congressmen on anything Eastern European, and also one who spent a great deal of time focusing on Jewish issues in that region due to his own family's experience. I don't believe his family was saved by the Swedish diplomat Raul Wallenberg, but I'm pretty sure his wife's family was. Tom Lantos, was a champion of keeping the Wallenberg case alive during the Soviet time when the Soviets claimed they didn't know anything about what was going on, they couldn't find any records. They essentially stonewalled. Lantos, to my Swedish-born wife's chagrin, was a lot more aggressive in pursuing the Wallenberg case than the Swedish government was. In any case, he came twice as it happened both on Easter Sunday which was

somewhat inconvenient for some of us on the embassy staff, but he was always a welcome visitor. He met with Zhivkov. I was chargé once, and he was with Ben Gilman who was the senior Republican minority member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. Bill Richardson, who later became Secretary of Energy, was with them.

Q: ...and governor of New Mexico.

RICKERT: And currently governor of New Mexico...

Q: And USUN ambassador.

RICKERT: That's right. So it was an interesting group. They met with Zhivkov, and Tom, whom I greatly admire in most respects, sometimes goes a little bit overboard on the Eastern European flattery. I recall him in a meeting with Zhivkov saying to Mr. Zhivkov that, "You, sir, are one of the great European statesmen of post-World War II," which caused me to swallow hard, but there was perhaps a little hyperbole there. Tom's interest in Bulgaria was over the fact that the Jewish population of Bulgaria, at the time that Bulgaria was aligned with Nazi Germany, not a single person was sent to death camps from Bulgaria. And there are a number of reasons for this but, in fact, the then king, the church, the governing and opposition parties and intellectuals all resisted this. Germans didn't push it to the limit, but all of the Jews of Bulgaria survived the war. Well, not all survived, but no one was sent away to death camps in Germany, Austria, Poland, or the other places. It was a major accomplishment which Lantos felt was not sufficiently well known. He wanted Bulgarians to know he appreciated and others who had interest in the fate of Jews in the world appreciated what Bulgaria had done to avoid the fate of so many others. The talks with Zhivkov... Zhivkov was rather engaging. It was all done in Bulgarian and then translation which inhibited the spontaneity of conversation, but they had good talks. But Zhivkov did say one thing to Lantos and Gilman and Richardson which struck me very, very strongly at the time. I'm not agreeing with this statement, but I think it says a lot about the Bulgarian mentality. He just volunteered that Bulgaria has no territorial claims on any of its neighbors. This was an interesting point because Macedonia is considered by many Bulgarians to be part of Bulgaria. There's a very complex history, and I think a lot of Bulgarians would like to have had Yugoslav Macedonia as part of Bulgaria. In any case, he made this statement, but he said, and this is the interesting part, "All of our neighbors have territorial claims against us." To me, that was part of the key to understanding the Bulgarian mentality and why the Soviet Union was so important. The Soviet Union, it seemed to me, was the guarantor of Bulgaria's territorial integrity. If you think that everybody else wants a piece of you, then the best thing you can have is a very big and very powerful protector, and in the Soviet Union, Bulgaria had that and needn't fear Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Romania, or even the Black Sea under those circumstances which were their neighbors.

Q: Do you want to say anything else about your involvement at the embassy as an alternate with the region, with other embassies, neighboring countries, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Soviet Union at that time?

RICKERT: The diplomatic corps, as is usually the case in these situations where contact with locals is very strictly limited, the diplomatic corps was very close. I got to know and deal with all

of the NATO and a few other counterparts professionally on a regular basis, and we exchanged information and so forth. Then several of them became very close personal friends. its interesting. I'm sure that a lot of people would disagree, but one piece of advice I got before going to Bulgaria from a former DCM, someone that you know, Roland Kuchel, was that the DCM must be friendly with everybody in this embassy, but "the" friend of no one, and he explained why. He said, "As soon as you become "the" friend of a person or two or three people, it immediately gets people thinking that the DCM favors this person...

Q: ...within the embassy...

RICKERT: ...within the embassy. He advised strongly... That didn't mean we didn't entertain people from the embassy. We had very good relations with, I think with everybody, but no close personal relationships with anybody except for some of the outsiders. Interestingly, the best friends that we...and not surprisingly...the British DCM, there were two of them. The second one we served with together in Romania and knew him, Mike Frost, from before. The Turkish DCM, Olive Kiddush, was very, very competent and nice and a very professional diplomat. We got to know him personally and went on picnics and did things like that. Interestingly, the first French DCM was a very good personal friend which isn't always the case. Mr. Jubierre, Mark Jubierre. He was a former French paratrooper who had been a French military attaché in Moscow. He then joined the Foreign Service and was, I wouldn't say uncritical – you don't want uncritical friends – but he was a real friend of the United States and was very eager to work closely with Americans as he had done in his ,military capacity in Moscow. I wish there were more such relationships because that was unusual. Had good relations with the Yugoslavs. The name of the Yugoslav Ambassador, DCM rather, escapes me at the moment., but he was a Macedonian, and he and I have no other common language than Bulgarian and Macedonian. That's what I found in practical terms how close the two languages are because my Bulgarian was far from perfect, but I could understand if he'd been speaking in Bulgarian and Macedonian 10% less, and he could understand my Bulgarian perfectly. They're very close. Some differences back then and a few different words, but they're almost like dialects in the same tongue.

Q: You talked about Zhivkov and some of the visitors. Do you want to say anything about the foreign minister, the foreign ministry?

RICKERT: Yes. The foreign minister was Mladenov who had been foreign minister for many years. He was not somebody that we saw frequently but made efforts to be friendly toward the end of Mel Levitsky's stay and beyond. He was very frank to say if there was anything important that he couldn't make a decision on although he was probably the senior foreign minister in Europe at the time in terms of length of service. He had a very bright and sometimes aggressive and sometimes charming deputy foreign minister named Lyuben Gotsev who was well known by Americans from earlier. Could be acerbic, could be ingratiating. I had some dealings with Gotsev on a quasi-personal/official matter twice while I was there. I was stopped by militia and treated in a way that wasn't appropriate for a foreign diplomat. The first time was when I was going to a city in South Central Bulgaria. We had received a diplomatic note from the foreign ministry. This city had been in what we called the "PRA", Permanently Restricted Area. About 20% of the country was off-limits to foreigners, most of it the border areas. This city had been opened, so Orthodox Easter Sunday my family and I, my mother who was visiting at the time, went to the

city, went to some Easter services on the way and went to the city, I don't recall the name. We were driving around, and we got stopped by the police, the "militia" as they were called, and the militia man was perfectly polite, but he said, "You're in restricted area. You're not allowed to be here, and I have to call my boss to see what to do about it." I said, "Well, I have a note from the foreign ministry which I had carefully brought with me in Bulgarian saying that this city was open and could be visited by foreigners, and I'm just doing what's permitted by the note that we have from your foreign ministry." He said, "Well, let me go and check." He went back, and he obviously was in radio contact with somebody and came back and said, "Yes, it's true that this city is now open, but it's only open up to that street which is behind you, and you've gone into the forbidden part of the city, and we won't do anything this time, but you'd better leave." So, we left, of course, and I didn't say anything to the Bulgarians about it that time. We did a lot of entertaining in our apartment which was beyond public transportation, and we had a maid and a cook who could not get home afterwards. So I would usually take the official car which was parked there where I lived. The embassy garage was there along with Marine housing and other things, and drive these two ladies home. One of them lived in a workers quarter and a large black American car with diplomatic plates were not normally seen in that area. I dropped her off, and – Svetanka Sposova was her name – and she went into her apartment, and then I was taking the cook home to her apartment, and the police came over and were fairly polite but started asking a lot of questions: "What are you doing here? Why?" and so forth, and they wanted my documentation and everything. I was polite as long as I could, and I finally said, "Look, you have no reason to be asking these questions, and I'm not going to answer any more, let me go," and they did. What I didn't know was the cook who was sitting in the front seat beside me had written down the number from the police car. I went to see Gotsev and said, "Look. You say that you want better relations, but you're treating the American chargé in a way that doesn't indicate a desire for better relations." I told him about both of these incidents, and I said, "I have not reported these to Washington," which was true. I said, "If it happens again, I will, and we'll make a real stink about it." He said, "Oh, thank you! Thank you for not reporting it!" It didn't happen again. But the state security was, indeed, very aggressive, and there were many incidents involving people in the embassy, some of it of the calling card nature of just letting us know that they'd been there. One of our employees had a teenage daughter, and the parents went away for the weekend, and the daughter was in the apartment alone. She went to go someplace to a party or something, and came back. At that time teenagers and young adults had their music on cassettes, and someone had come with something like we're using here with an ice-pick like implement and had destroyed all of their pop music cassettes in the locked apartment. Nothing else was touched. Nothing was stolen. It was just a little notice that, "We can come whenever we want and do whatever we want, and there's nothing you can do to stop it." Another thing at the time was Chernobyl. Chernobyl occurred, and it was particularly important in Bulgaria because Bulgaria in Kosovela has a similar power plant north on the Danube, some distance north of Sofia. There was great concern within the American community and, as well, within the Western diplomatic community that if Chernobyl can go, what about Kosovela? Fortunately, the flow of the radioactivity from Kosovela for reasons of air currents and so forth, was to the north, and we didn't get much in Bulgaria although we were warned against eating certain products: sheep, cheese, because sheep graze very close to the ground, and if there was any radioactivity it would be ingested and turned up in the cheese.

Q: We were talking about Chernobyl and what it meant to your embassy in Sofia.

RICKERT: An expert came out and, interestingly, they went up to the vicinity of Kosovela, the Bulgarian plant, and took readings to see if there were any signs of leakage and radioactivity from the Kosovela plant. And then they came back and took readings for comparative purposes in Sofia. They found the readings higher in Sofia than they were outside the Kosovela plant which led us to joke that there was an underground nuclear power plant in the heart of downtown Sofia. The danger was not what was happening at the time. The danger was shown that after the explosion of Chernobyl that any reactor of that type posed a risk, and people had a new appreciation for the difficulties that could ensue. One of the things that Eastern European dictators used to do and which Zhivkov still did was to have an annual diplomatic excursion. In some places there were hunts. Zhivkov did not take people hunting. He went to a different town each year. I was chargé and went on a trip to Blagoevgrad in about May '87. I did a reporting cable on it, and it gives the whole atmosphere in the way its done and how they stage-managed these events. It was one of the most interesting things that I did in Bulgaria because you actually got to see the leadership up close, not in a formalistic kind of "on top of the mausoleum watching the troops" type of situation. So that was well worth doing.

Q: Did you get quite a bit of travel within the country to the extent that you were able? There were some of the areas that were restricted.

RICKERT: Yeah. Bulgaria is a relatively small country. Due to restrictions within the United States on East European diplomats, according to which they had to give 48 hours notice to OFM to travel certain distances, the Bulgarians who had not had restrictions on us before, aside from the permanently restricted areas, slapped similar restrictions on us. So the common mode of travel in Bulgaria was day trips because you didn't have to report that.

Q: You didn't have to ask permission in advance?

RICKERT: That's right. You could literally go from one end of the country within a day, in a very long day. In fact, I did so at one time with Major Mike Hayden. We went on a very aggressive defense attaché excursion. We went up to the northeast and back in the same day. I got to see first-hand how the really good people in that side of diplomatic life performed. We did a lot of small trips. There are many monasteries in Bulgaria. The country is beautiful. Its mountainous. There are picturesque villages. Our cook was from a village called Koprivshtitsa which is a restored village. It's a historic village, and when we were there it seemed to be about 80% restored, and the rest was being gradually restored. Her mother lived there, and interestingly, that was the only Bulgarian home that we ever visited. Only one Bulgarian ever came to our apartment privately in three years although my wife and I both spoke quite decent Bulgarian.

Q: Only one came privately, but you entertained others.

RICKERT: Yes, we entertained, and invitations went to the foreign ministry and were checked by the state security, and determinations were made who could accept and who couldn't. When I was chargé the turnout would be better on a higher level, and when I was DCM it was scaled back in accordance with my lower status. It was not possible to entertain. It was virtually

impossible for an American to entertain privately.

Q: But on one occasion you did extend directly an invitation, and it was accepted.

RICKERT: It was interesting. At the end of our time there, we met a Bulgarian sculptor who obviously had a green light to meet with foreigners. We had him do busts of our two children and got to know him a bit. Indeed, I saw him last summer when I was back, and he's become a great friend of Ambassador Pardew. We talked about Balkan art, and I mentioned to him that we had some paintings by probably Romania's most famous painter of the 20th Century, a man named Corneliu Baba. We were close personal friends of him, and we have several paintings of his. Chokov, the sculptor, said he would love to see the paintings. We said, "They're in our apartment, and we're leaving in two weeks, and if you would like to see them, you have to come there because that's where they are." He hemmed and hawed and mulled over it, and he said he would get back to us, and he did. He came for coffee, and he saw the paintings and left. That was the one case of a non-channeled invitation to a Bulgarian who came to our house. To show the mentality there, my wife did a lot of shopping herself. She spoke quite good Bulgarian, and she would go to the markets and talk with the market ladies and get fresh fruit and vegetables and so forth. Two incidents happened that were, I think, revealing. Once she arrived in the market, in the summer at some point, and found a rather nice load of wild blueberries for sale. She talked to the lady and said, "How much do you have here?" She said, "I have eight kilos," and my wife said, "I'll take them all." And the woman said, "No, you can't have them all." And Gerd said, "Why, don't you want to sell them?" She said, "Yes, but if you buy them all, there won't be any left for anybody else." My wife said, "Okay. Well, could you bring more blueberries another time?" She said, "Yes." So, we set up an arrangement whereby she would bring a supply. We bought usually over 50 kilos of blueberries a year and froze them. Blueberries freeze very nicely, and they are full of iron and all sorts of good stuff. We ate them on cereal which made the ultra-UHT milk taste less unpleasant than it did otherwise, and we could get the kids to take their supply of milk that way. Another time she wanted to buy tomatoes. Bulgarian tomatoes are wonderful and really outstanding. She wanted to get large tomatoes in order to fill them. She asked the lady if she could have a kilo of large tomatoes, and the woman said, "You get what you get. I fish 'em up, and if they're large, they're large; if they're small, they're small." And she explained, "Please, I just want large ones," and so forth and so on. This discussion went on, and there was a line behind my wife, and she was arguing with this woman. The Bulgarians behind her said, "Can't you see this nice foreign lady has a good reason why she wants the large tomatoes, and she speaks our language, and she's being polite? Give her what she wants! Don't be so difficult!" So she had the others in the line probably wanting to get their tomatoes as well and being held up, but they were on her side which was interesting. The woman grudgingly gave mostly large tomatoes and a few small ones, so she didn't cave in completely. It was another indication of the local mentality.

One of the things, going back to the Turkish issue: First of all, the Bulgarians claimed there were no Turks there. We were fortunate in that the head of our political econ section, Oscar Clyatt, had served in Turkey. He spoke very good Turkish and also liked to get in a car and drive around. He went to Turkish areas, and he was usually followed but occasionally, without going through any special effort, shook free. He would go to the villages and sit down at a coffee house and order coffee in Turkish. When he did that, people would start talking with him. He provided

the first in-country verification that people in these villages, whatever the Bulgarians were saying, *they* considered themselves to be Turkish. I mean, there were refugees who had gone to Turkey who said this, but Bulgarians said, “Well, they just want their refugee status and Turkey won’t keep them if they say they’re Bulgarian.” Oscar did this on several occasions, and Oscar was a difficult personality in some ways, but he did such a good job in this area that I put him up for the HUMINT (Human Intelligence) Collector Award which he got. I think it was well deserved because he did establish something that was important in U. S. policy and bilateral relations at that time.

Q: Anything else?

RICKERT: One time we went to a place called Bankya which is outside of Sofia. There was a handicrafts fair there which we attended. There was a cartoonist there who was selling his works there, and he had a cartoon there that I liked called “Glas Nost.” It had a picture of a rather large man and a French horn-like musical instrument with a very large bell. He had it inverted, so he was obviously shouting into the bell, the large end of the horn, and you could see strong lines going there. At the mouthpiece end there were these little lines coming out. I talked with him and said, “I’m an ignorant foreigner, and I don’t understand your politics here. What does this mean?” He said, “Oh,” he said. “Where Glas Nost is concerned, there’s a lot more noise at the source than there is at the other end.” I said, “That’s interesting. I’d like to buy it. How much do you charge for it?” He said, “Well, I usually get about 120, 125 leva for my cartoons,” which was close to \$150, and this was not in a frame or anything. I knew I had 20 leva in my pocket, so I reached into my wallet and opened it up, and I looked, and you could see there were only 20 leva. I said, “No, I’m very sorry, I can’t buy it. I only have 20 leva.” “Sold!” So I treasured that one. He had another cartoon which I didn’t buy because I only had the 20 leva, but it was a comment on the medical profession with a doctor sitting behind a table something like this looking in a file. There’s a patient opposite him who is wrapped from head to toe. You can’t even tell if its male or female, but bandaged entirely. The doctor without looking up said, “Please take off your clothes.” Interestingly, the Glas Nost cartoon did appear in the party daily, the “Rabota Jisko Dello.” So there were some small signs of Glas Nost. There was another cartoon that I remember which perhaps presaged things to come. It was drawings set up like an equation. The equation was: state materials + state labor + state land = private villa. It was a comment on corruption which was existing even at that time.

Q: Anticipating more to come.

RICKERT: Of course, it was relatively small scale at that time. The Marines presented a number of problems, as nice and as delightful as they were in many regards. One of the few recreations they had was skiing, and they would go off to Vitosha. Most of them had never skied before, and with the folly of youth and the daring-do of typical Marines, they would just get on skis and head down the hills. They were a sight to behold. We had a couple of broken legs, and they had to be warned off from skiing because we would have had insufficient watch standards because of their limited state. Another time some of our Marines were engaged in a fight in a bar by some Bulgarians who obviously knew what they were doing. The men handled the Marines. Beat them up pretty good and pretty well. Interestingly, the proof to me that it was all prearranged was that there was one black Marine in this Group, John Cochrahan, who was the special friend of my son

and daughter. He played Monopoly with them and did things. Very, very nice man from Louisiana. He was one of the terrors on the slopes, by the way. Very athletic, but skiing requires more than athleticism. The white Marines were being pummeled by these Bulgarian thugs, toughs. Two of them just pinned Cochrahan to the wall. Didn't hurt him but didn't let him get into the fight. It said to me that they wanted to teach the marines a lesson but they didn't want to give anyone an excuse for saying it was racial or racist. After the Lonetree affair in Moscow, each one of our Marines was taken out to Vienna or Frankfurt, I've forgotten where, and polygraphed. It turned out that several of them had relations with Bulgarian girls, so they disappeared very quickly which I can understand. The one thing that was sad to me was that the brightest and sharpest of the Marines at that time apparently had not broken any rules except that he hadn't told on his fellow Marines, so he was kicked out as well. I'm not sure that the ones that were sent were any better than ones that left. It was a very tough case. The Lonetree case really did shake up all the embassies in the region because of the allegations which never were fully proved that Sgt. Lonetree in Moscow let Russians run through the communications center and other places in the embassy; and that he'd had some sort of an improper relationship with a Russian woman which I think is well established, but I'm not sure what has been proven about the more dramatically serious allegations.

Q: You mentioned the Marines on the ski slope and obviously your family enjoyed it as well. Was that a place where you would meet Bulgarians, or was it pretty much the American international community that would mostly be there.

RICKERT: That's a very good question because its one of the few places where we had free and uninhibited conversations with Bulgarians. If you're riding in a ski lift, there are two of you. There's no fear of microphones or any other kind of listening device, and you get off at the other end and one goes one way and another goes another way, and that's it. We did have some very interesting conversations in those circumstances. But those, unfortunately, were the exception rather than the rule. There was a great deal of fear, apparently, among Bulgarians. We met another sculptor that we tried to get to know and arranged to visit him in his studio. There was nothing clandestine at all about this. When we got there we found that the guy was almost shivering. We met him through the Hungarian ambassador who was a very nice man and interested in the arts. He said, "You should get to know this guy. I know him," so we tried. When we met with him in his studio, he had a functionary from the ministry of culture there. We asked if it would be possible to buy something from him, and he referred us to a local gallery that carried his works. We found out later that he had gotten in trouble earlier in his career by consorting with foreigners. As to the difficulty of dealing with Bulgarians, it was interesting. We got to know most of the Warsaw Pact ambassadors and DCM's quite well, and most of them were very friendly. They complained that their students had great difficulty in establishing any kind of friendship or rapport with Bulgarians, so it wasn't only Americans, apparently. Another sign that things were starting to unravel a little bit was I remember getting a little diplomatic note from the Romanian embassy criticizing Hungary over some interfering in Romania's internal affairs on the ethnic Hungarian minority. That would have been unheard of earlier. The remaining DCM with whom we became quite friendly used to tell us things that we couldn't get from any other source about what was going in Warsaw Pact meetings. Not state secrets, but he said Bulgarians were trying to get them to support Turkish name chains campaign, and none of the other Warsaw Pact countries would do so which resulted in some, I think, useful reporting.

He – Toman Baloshoya was his name – he wanted us to know about this and was happy to pass along the dirt on the Romanians. The Romanians and Bulgarians, they weren't sworn enemies, but they don't have the best relations. At the end of my tour there, I mentioned earlier that I did all of my business with Bulgarians in Bulgarian. Just as I was leaving Bill Montgomery was arriving – my successor – and Sol Polanski gave a very nice luncheon to sort of “hail and farewell.” There were several Bulgarian foreign ministry people there. After the luncheon two of them took me aside and said, “Mr. Rickert, we notice that you have always spoken Bulgarian with us in all of your meetings, and we know that isn't easy, and we appreciate it. We want you to know that the Soviets never speak Bulgarian with us.” I thought all that work at FSI and elsewhere has done something because that was... I was going to say it was the best compliment but it was the *only* compliment I ever got from a Bulgarian.

Q: Okay.

RICKERT: One other little thing. Mel Levitsky left about February '87, and the week that he left the State magazine came out with Sofia as post of the month. The embassy had collected a bunch of photographs. In those days the post of the month was mostly photographs and very little text. Local scenes and then embassy activities. John Beyrle, now DCM of Moscow, took most of the pictures. I took two or three of them, and he took the rest. He said to us the summer before it took a while to collect these pictures but he would like to take a picture of my wife and me and our two kids in front of the National Theater which was just around the corner from the embassy. So we did that one day, and that picture went in with all the rest for the editors to select. Much to our surprise and, I have to admit, delight, when the State magazine came out, the Rickert family was on the cover. Many people have asked over the years – I usually had it hanging in my office or something like that – and they'd say, “Is that the DCM residence in the background?” I'd say, “No, it's the state national theater and considerably greater than any residence in Sofia.” It says in Bulgarian *Kifan Baza State Theater*, but that's another matter.

Q: Very good. You were the cover!

RICKERT: The cover family. Right.

SOL POLANSKY
Ambassador
Bulgaria (1987-1990)

Ambassador Polansky was born in New Jersey and raised in California. He served in the U.S. navy in World War II. He attended the University of California at Berkeley and Columbia University. His overseas postings included USSR, Poland, Germany, Austria and Bulgaria. Ambassador Polansky was interviewed in 1992 by Charles Stuart Kennedy.

Q: You went to Bulgaria in 1987. As you went, what were American interests and what were you going to try to do in Bulgaria?

POLANSKY: What was quite clear, was that we had very little in the way of significant interest in Bulgaria. Our interests were more in Turkey and the southern flank of NATO and guarding that. We were not expecting much from Bulgaria in terms of US national security interests or US economic or political interests. We certainly didn't expect the Bulgarians to side with us on any issues in the UN. It was a very solid ally of Moscow. It was looked on as a holding operation and we tried at least to increase the exchange programs and open up the possibilities for young Bulgarians to learn about the United States.

Q: How about drug interdiction?

POLANSKY: That was certainly an interest; that an arms sales. We spent a lot of time talking to the Bulgarians about drug shipments through Bulgaria from Turkey to Central Europe. It was mainly truck traffic. They flatly denied it and said that they had adequate means to inspect. After awhile we did work out some arrangements for some customs visits from the US, but they were non-productive. The Bulgarians didn't cooperate very much. That became a source of irritation in our relationship. The Bulgarians did not seem to be playing fair.

Q: Was it just nationalism and they didn't want anyone to interfere or did you feel they had a hand in getting payments?

POLANSKY: There was the feeling that some people were getting paid off. While the Bulgarians put on a face of wanting to be cooperative and understanding, there was nothing in practice that let us believe that they were really trying to stop the traffic.

Q: I get the feeling that not an awful lot of attention was being paid to Bulgaria back in Washington.

POLANSKY: I think it was negative attention. It was on things like arms and drug sales. A lot of attention, in a relative sense, was paid when Bulgaria started to harass Turks and send them back to Turkey.

Q: What about arms sales? Who were they selling to?

POLANSKY: It was never really clear, except to Third World countries. I think it was the drug trafficking more than the arms sales, that caused problems.

Q: How did you read the fact that the Bulgarians were all of a sudden forcing the Turks to leave their territory?

POLANSKY: I think it developed in a way they really didn't anticipate. It all came out of the CSCE process and that process led to a series of agreements and understandings that all of the countries signed up to, but in fact, provided for more travel and easier access to exit visas and passports. In effect, the Bulgarians were challenged on it by the Turks and any Bulgarian of Turkish descent, who wanted to leave, could get a passport immediately and go. Some Bulgarian Turks thought this might not last long and grabbed on to it. Some did and there were some

assertions that the Turks were provoking the whole thing and there was an action\reaction, with the Turks challenging the Bulgarian authorities to let the Turks go and the Bulgarians were saying that they were letting anyone who wanted to, go. Then the Bulgarian Turks went to try and get passports and visas, sold all the houses and their possessions and took off as quickly as they could. From the US government perspective it was a case of the Bulgarians not permitting the Turks to leave in a decent way, they were being harassed and having to sell their property at low cost. The thing just escalated. Over three hundred thousand Bulgarian Turks left in a period of several weeks.

Q: What were you doing as the US Ambassador?

POLANSKY: First of all we were sending Embassy officers around the country to see how Bulgarian Turks were being treated, whether they felt they really could go and if so, under what circumstances. How difficult it was to get a passport and then try and convince the Bulgarian authorities that if they were going to let people go, they do it in a way that was decent and humane. We went down to the border any number of times to see how people were being treated and it was really rather, not brutal, but not conducive to human behavior. They were sitting out in trucks without any means of water or sanitation; they were held for hours at a time and then forced to unpack all of their possessions very carefully in front of Bulgarian customs officials and then forced to put it all together and then creep through the no man's land between Bulgarian and Turkish customs officials. Then on the Turkish side they had to do the same thing over again. It was a very unpleasant set of circumstances in the middle of summer.

Q: We just didn't have any particular clout there?

POLANSKY: We had a little bit of clout in the sense that the Bulgarians had agreed to CSCE conditions and terms. We certainly had no clout in trying to make it a more reasonable exit for the Bulgarian Turks who wanted to go.

Q: You were at a momentous time when things in Eastern Europe fell apart.

POLANSKY: We saw what was happening in Czechoslovakia and East Berlin on CNN and then saw the Bulgarians themselves take part in the whole process. That became the most rewarding part of the assignment. The most rewarding assignment in the Foreign Service. Not only to watch, but to use whatever appropriate means we had, to bring about change.

Q: We are talking about the events of 1989. How were the Bulgarians getting their information? How were they reacting initially?

POLANSKY: Some of them were getting their information from Western news sources, where there was RFE or CNN in a smaller way. A fair amount of Western news information was getting through. For the Bulgarians, they saw the Berlin Wall being pierced, they saw it on their own television, so they knew what was happening there. In fact, the piercing of the Wall and the ouster of Honeker happened almost at the same time. Todor Zhirkov was the Bulgarian dictator or Communist Party leader. For the Bulgarians, who saw what was happening elsewhere in Eastern Europe, they used an environmental movement in effect to become the political

opposition. They used again a CSCE conference on environmental issues that was taking place in Sofia as a way of getting their message out to the West and drawing some support and inspiration from it. What happened in October was, when the CSCE conference was taking place, some environmentalists wanted to use the occasion to make their protest known to this international conference. The Bulgarian police were not about to let it happen. There was a confrontation and some of the environmentalists were roughed up. This caused some of the Western governments to let the Bulgarians know that they were not going to tolerate this kind of behavior in the conference. It caused a certain amount of turmoil within the Bulgarian Communist Party and that really became a pretext for the more moderate wing of the Bulgarian Communist Party to overthrow Zhirkov as simply being too rigid. They knew from what was happening elsewhere in Eastern Europe that Zhirkov was not going to get any support from Gorbachev. In fact, Gorbachev made it plain that he wouldn't. Consequently, we had been suggesting to the Department, it might be appropriate for Secretary Baker to come to Bulgaria at some point, if he was traveling elsewhere in Eastern Europe, because it did seem that at least there was some movement in the Bulgarian Communist Party toward a more moderate view and it was something we ought to encourage and try and take advantage of. In February of 1990, he did come to Sofia from Moscow, for a very quick trip. He basically told the new Bulgarian Communist leaders, who were really the group around Zhirkov, now without Zhirkov, that if they wanted a better relationship with the US, and they had talked about free and fair elections, that would be the measure of what we would judge Bulgaria by. If they really had free and fair elections, we would respect the outcome and see where we could try and improve and expand the relationship. That became the framework within which we operated for the next four or five months until the Bulgarians really did have elections. We wanted to make sure that the opposition really did have a chance to express its views, had access to the media. I had many discussions with the Bulgarian Prime Minister and others about the availability, for the opposition, of newsprint. I got all kinds of excuses from them why newsprint couldn't be available in the quantities the opposition wanted. We traveled all over the country talking about the importance of free elections. The USIA and other organizations helped support the development of a public Bulgarian organization to observe the elections and make sure the elections were being held in a free and fair manner. The National Democratic Institute and the National Republican Institute came in with equipment and gave training on how opposition parties could organize themselves and conduct campaigns. All of this was going on with the Communist Party tolerating it?

Q: Had they just lost heart?

POLANSKY: They saw what was happening elsewhere. The Bulgarian Communist Party had been around for a long, long time. I think they felt they might stand a chance to come out better than some of the communist parties did elsewhere in Eastern Europe. They were really the only organized political force in the country with any experience. They ran, in many ways, a more coherent campaign, than the opposition did. The elections were held, there may have been some slight manipulation. We did have, in addition to the unofficial Bulgarian organization that was observing the election, international teams that came to observe the elections, including one from the United States. By and large the feeling was, the elections were free and open.

Q: How did it come out?

POLANSKY: The results were that the opposition had something like forty three percent and the Communists had something like thirty seven percent. You had a new Parliament that had opposition as well as Communists in it. The opposition was able to name a non-Communist person to be President. The Socialists went along with it. You wound up with the first non Communist government in Bulgaria in over forty-five years in August of 1990, with a non Communist President. It was a very gratifying four or five months when we were able to conduct that kind of activity.

Q: What about police control? Were you able to see opposition leaders as this went on?

POLANSKY: At the beginning, in November of 1989, there was one small opposition group, it stood for Glasnost and Perestroika, we had virtually no contact with them. We gave all sorts of signals that we would like to have contact with them, but for their own reasons, they simply felt it wasn't appropriate. It wasn't until about December of 1989 that we were able to work out a very informal, but useful meeting with Zhelev, who was the leader of this club, who subsequently became the leader of this opposition and later the President. That part of it was a hard go. They simply weren't ready at the time. After Secretary Baker came in February of 1990, then it became easier and then you could see people and have access to all sorts of people; they made themselves available. We went all over the country talking to members of the opposition; talking to members of the Socialist party, members of the Agrarian Party, basically just taking the message we had about free and fair elections if they wanted a better relations with the United States. I think we were unique in that, I don't think any other Western Embassy went through that process the way we did. It's not sort of the thing we were trained to do, it developed out of the circumstances.

Q: You left when and by that time had they created a new government?

POLANSKY: I left in August of 1990. They had created a new government. Zhelev was sworn in as President on August 1st. I saw him on the fifteenth, just before I left.

Q: It is now 1993 and Yugoslavia is in a terrible mess. Did Bulgaria have aspirations toward Macedonia, or any parts of Greece or Turkey?

POLANSKY: The answer is no. The democratic opposition that came in really had no territorial ambitions. They wanted to improve their relations with Turkey to the extent that they could. They did virtually everything that the United States asked Bulgaria to do in connection with the Gulf War. The Bulgarians lost oil resources as a result of that. Iraq was one of their main suppliers. They lost a tremendous amount of money, but they went along with the embargo without delay. They let us know that they were going to take a terrible economic beating, but they understood the importance of it and in the first year after the new government came in, what they were trying to do was to demonstrate their readiness in being forthcoming in their support of Western foreign policy on a whole range of things.

Q: Did the concept of "Macegre" or Macedonia show its head at all?

POLANSKY: It has its roots back to the 1930s and even earlier. I don't think, except maybe for a few small minority parties during the election period, the idea of a greater Bulgaria, incorporating parts of Macedonia, ever entered into it. There was a Royalist party, there still is, in terms of return to the King. I think the whole question of Macedonia has obviously become more sensitive and significant in connection with what's happening in Yugoslavia. I think a sense of "Macedonianess" is being created in that part of Bulgaria, that is part of Macedonia. My own feeling is that it is artificial on the Bulgarian side. It can be stimulated but it is not being stimulated from the inside, it is being stimulated from the outside. But it exists and it is becoming something that is a little more worrisome to the Bulgarians. I think that is one of the reasons the Bulgarians were very quick to recognize Macedonia as a separate, independent state. I think they hoped that that would calm things down. I think Zhelev has stroked the other party a number of times in order to maintain a relationship with them. I think there is some concern. If it keeps up in Yugoslavia, I think the concern will increase and so will the sense of Macedonian nationalism.

LAWRENCE I. PLOTKIN
Public Affairs Officer, USIS
Sofia (1994-1997)

Larry Plotkin was born in Chicago in 1939 and educated at UCLA. He entered the Foreign Service and USIA in 1973. His career included posts in Warsaw, Poznan, Panama City, Belgrade and Sofia. He was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 2004.

Q: How did you find Bulgarian?

PLOTKIN: I'd always been told that once you hit 50 your ability to learn another foreign language decreases significantly. I hadn't given that any serious thought, but I had indeed hit 50 and then some. Bulgarian is the easiest of Slavic languages because it has none of the declensions of Polish and Serbian, though it does have an enclitic article. I thought it was going to be easy. Not so. I ran into three different buzz saws. My language learning ability had plummeted. I found that I couldn't retain new vocabulary nearly as well as in the past. I understood the structure of the language, but I'd learn a new word in paragraph A and by the time I was the same word in B, the definition was gone and I'd be cursing myself. It was really a hassle.

On top of that in the middle of the course I had neck surgery, a couple of vertebrae fused. Finally, my predecessor bailed out early and the Embassy and EUR put pressure on me to go to Sofia early. The result was that a slower learner only got about 2/3 of the 44 weeks course. I'm convinced that FSI gave me a passing 3/3 out of sympathy. While I got by decently in Sofia, my Bulgarian was never as good as my Serbian, a harder language.

Q: You served in Sofia from '94 to '97. What was the situation in Bulgaria like?

PLOTKIN: They had already had their first post-communist elections before we got there and had put a center-right party in power, but new elections were called shortly after we arrived. Many from the Embassy served as election monitors throughout the country.

The good news was that the elections were clearly free and fair. On the day that I spent as a monitor, I visited 10 precincts and was invited by the first one to come back at the end of the day to help them count the votes. I kept an appropriate distance, but did participate in the process in an almost direct way. At every precinct we visited, the precinct officers were excited to show us how fair and open it was. Voters who came to the wrong polling site were quickly directed to their correct precinct. The voting booths were fully private. We dropped in on precincts unannounced and all the U.S. monitors, and those from other international organizations, had pretty much the same experience. It was complicated by the large number of political parties participating. Many had no hope of winning a seat in parliament, but each had its color-coded ballot. I once had a complete set of ballots; I think there were 44 parties running, each with its chosen color, some striped, making it possible even for the semi-illiterate to vote their choices. The process worked well.

The bad news was that, in the end, the former communists, now re-named socialists, were voted back into power. This caused us some grief in terms of our ability to work with the government; it wasn't a disaster, but was highly frustrating. A couple of years later the Bulgarians took to the streets to oust the socialists from office by forcing new elections.

Q: Who was your ambassador when you arrived?

PLOTKIN: It was Bill Montgomery, later replaced by Avis Bohlen.

Q: What were your responsibilities as public affairs officer?

PLOTKIN: A little bit of everything. This was prior to what I think of as the hostile takeover of USIA by the State Department. USIS programs were closely coordinated with State and the other agencies in Sofia, but we had our own budget and, to a degree, our own priorities. We had a suite of offices about a kilometer from the chancery. Obviously our autonomy began and ended with the good will of the ambassador so making sure that I wasn't out of line was always part of the balancing act that those of us had to perform who were heads of independent or semi-independent agency offices.

The programs I supervised included the Fulbright and International Visitors programs, a book publishing program, a media center and library, cultural presentations, intense work with the Bulgarian and, occasionally the U.S. and international media, the Democracy Commission grant program, a program that took key Bulgarians on visits to NATO, and more. I managed a staff of five FSOs, later cut to four, and a staff of about 20 FSNs.

In addition to managing and doing some hands on work with these programs, I, of course, advised the ambassador on public affairs issues. Bulgaria had and probably still has a press that was very free, but entirely irresponsible. Each newspaper and magazine was strongly associated either with one of the political parties or the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a labor group, or the

like. There was very little objective reporting. Basically each journal spun stories according to the political, religious or social point of view it advocated. I almost bought drinks for everybody the one time that a reporter actually called me before publishing a story to get the embassy's view of whether it was true or not. That happened once in three years. The IO got a few calls, too, but by and large it was wide open. The press also created stories out of whole cloth. On one occasion, Bill Montgomery went to Italy for a meeting between NATO Mediterranean command officials and a number of U.S. ambassadors from the region. I don't know what they discussed behind closed doors, but at least one newspaper thought it did. What they had discussed behind closed doors was how to restore all the monarchies of Eastern Europe. I've got the newspaper to prove it.

On another occasion, it was reported that the ambassador's wife was pregnant. She wasn't, and wore her tightest dresses for several weeks thereafter. What do you do with these stories? The ambassador was furious in both cases - and there were other cases, too - and really wanted to counter attack. My job was to help him distinguish between those stories that merited a response because they were important enough in terms of our bilateral relationship and U.S. policy, and those that were best left alone to die a quiet death without any response from us. Personal pique was not the issue and often a response simply gives longer life and a degree of credibility to garbage. We did respond to serious misinformation and we worked hard to have an impact on the way stories were reported that were directly related to our interests and on getting the media to cover stories important to us.

Q: You say there was a free press and at the same time the old line communist party was in power. How did they live together?

PLOTKIN: The communists by then had a younger generation of leaders in charge; the new prime minister was under 40. While in his heart he may have wished to reestablish the good old days of communist control, the Socialists had pretty much acknowledged that some of the changes that had taken place could not be reversed, at least not without calling out the army which might well not have responded as they wished, and that there were other national issues of greater concern, especially the economy.

Bulgaria was losing population. The best and brightest were emigrating in large numbers. While they appreciated Bulgaria's new found freedoms, they also saw much greater economic opportunity elsewhere and finally had the right to leave if they chose to do so. Sometimes it was deeply disappointing to us because we really wanted some of these people to stay and help change the place. For example, one member of Bulgaria's supreme court who had been a Fulbright grantee teaching the United States was ready to bail out. There were many others.

Shortly after I arrived in 1994, I had the opportunity to initiate an exciting new program created for Bulgaria and the rest of the former Soviet bloc. It was called the Democracy Commission, a program of small grants to new NGOs in fields related to democratization and creation of a civil society. USAID inaugurated an analogous program about a year later. For both programs we created an Embassy interagency working group headed by the ambassador to review all the applications. It gave each of us a chance to argue for our favorite NGOs, to influence the distribution of funds, and to have a stake in the success of local NGOs. We made a concerted

effort to advertise the availability of these grants country-wide and to make certain that NGOs outside of Sofia had a fair share of our support. One FSN on my staff spent a significant portion of his time visiting the NGOs, checking their books and making certain that the funds were appropriately spent.

One NGO we funded created the first street law program in Bulgaria. It was headed by one of the foremost lawyers on the University of Sofia faculty who, incidentally, was also the coach of Bulgaria's first law student teams to participate in international moot court competitions. He had had part of his education in Australia and about a year after we left the country in 1997, he immigrated to Australia. Losing people like him hurt our efforts and hurt Bulgaria even more. On the other hand, you can't fault them for wanting to make the best lives for themselves and their families. It's among the risks you take in opening the doors of a country.

Let me go back to your original question about how the former communists were doing. When we arrived, it was just a few years after communism was defeated and Bulgaria was free of Soviet domination. The bad news was that the immediate economic effect was a drop in the standard of living for the majority of Bulgarians. The drop in the standard of living was made all the worse by a general collapse in social services, a real and strongly perceived increase in crime, and a greater disparity of income from the poor to the wealthy. Crime had been largely underreported in the past and wealth hidden. The majority of Bulgarians felt, and often were, poorer and at great risk in 1994 than they had been in 1989. They felt that the government had lost control of the country. Medical care was harder to come by for the poorest people in particular.

As a result, it was no surprise that they voted for the former communists. However, the socialists were even less successful than the center-right party in their attempts to manage and reform the country and, in 1997, lost power to a new center-right government. That party, in turn, lost power to Czar Simeon's party, and that party is now apparently on the ropes. Bulgaria has gone through a series of governmental changes with each new set of governors failing to bring the changes that people demand if they are to vote again for that party. That's the bad news. The good news is that all elections have been free and fair and every change in government has been peaceful. Nobody's been shot. There hasn't been any significant electoral fraud, and, by and large, the staffs of the ministries have remained in place allowing for a degree of functioning governmental continuity.

Q: Did we have programs trying to do anything to try to create a responsible press?

PLOTKIN: Certainly. Many of our exchange grantees were from the media. We brought American media experts to Bulgaria to give seminars and work with newspapers, radio and television as advisors. These were people were placed in Bulgarian media for a month and helped them to try to become economically viable and as modern and Western in their standards as possible. But newspapers and magazines had little incentive to adopt standards of objective reporting. Their first priority was to sell papers and advertising and to support the political party they were aligned with. Often, that meant sensational stories that were totally undocumented. Headlines were as sensational as possible, even when the story that followed was entirely routine.

There's some of that in every culture, but in Bulgaria, with one possible exception, all the papers were, in essence, tabloids. At least a few individuals in the media were changed by our programs, but it was a hard sell. One attempt we made was to reach them young by working closely with the country's two university-level journalism programs. The largest was at the University of Sofia; the other was at the American University of Bulgaria, AUBG. We brought the Bulgarian faculty to the U.S. for training and orientation and placed American grantees on their faculties. We also helped with curriculum development.

AUBG is an interesting story. It opened in 1991 under the aegis of the University of Maine as one of the first U.S. universities in Eastern Europe. It has had major grants from both USAID and Soros. It now has its independent accreditation through the Northeast Association of Universities of the United States. AUBG graduated its first class of 100 students in May 1995. The kids are terrific. They're getting an American undergraduate degree in Bulgaria, all classes taught in English, all taught to American standards. A substantial part of the faculty is American and they and the school's graduates are beginning to make a difference. Many graduates have degrees in business and all have fluent English, highly desirable assets to Bulgarian firms wishing to expand their markets outside of the country and to foreign firms working in Bulgaria.

Q: Normally what you do as public affairs officer is try to have dialogue with the media, get them to present your point of view correctly and this can be like talking to a bunch of kindergarten kids about ethics. How do you work with irresponsible journalists?

PLOTKIN: Perhaps I overstated the case a little bit. We could, for example, get almost anybody we wanted to interview the ambassador and we were able to maintain editorial control of the interview. Further, there was intense interest in the United States, its positions on issues and everything about our culture. By timing interviews, careful not to flood the press and make them ordinary events, by getting stuff out when we wanted to, by making the ambassador available to journalists, we were able to get our voice heard in a very direct way. We also used visiting luminaries, both from the U.S. government and the private sector. Among those for whom I organized highly attended and successful press conferences were Zbigniew Brzezinski and Harvard economist Michael Saks. Other visitors included Secretary Cohen, General Clark, Justices Rehnquist and O'Connor. All attracted huge media attention and, for the most part, their visits were objectively reported. Using people as interesting and credible as these gave us a real shot at setting the record straight and countering the wildest fabrications about our policies.

Q: Was television an important medium?

PLOTKIN: It was increasing important because the government stations began to have private sector competition while we were there, both Bulgarian and from overseas. These broadcasters were beginning to have an impact. They provided alternative news sources, especially for the growing number of Bulgarians for who television was their primary source of information. When we were kids, there were afternoon newspapers. The evening news on television killed them. We are seeing the same impact in Eastern Europe where, little by little, people are abandoning print for electronic media.

Q: How about their tapping into things like CNN and European television and all.

PLOTKIN: That, too, was increasing. Some of it was via the use of foreign broadcasts on Bulgarian television, some through the increasing availability of satellite dishes. Many apartment buildings had so many they looked like mushroom farms. They were pulling in both news and entertainment. Even Latin American telenovellas. I remember seeing such programs both in Bulgaria and in Yugoslavia

Q: When you were in Bulgaria, all hell was breaking loose in the Balkans, at least in Bosnia. What was the reaction in Sofia and what were we doing from your perspective?

PLOTKIN: We worked very closely with the Bulgarian government on issues relating to their substantial border with Serbia. A porous border presented a couple of major temptations to Bulgarians. Most important was the temptation of profit from smuggling into Serbia material that we didn't want the Serbs to have. That was complicated by the frequent cooperation of Bulgarian customs officials. They were poorly trained and even more poorly paid. It made them highly susceptible to bribery.

The issue that had the most negative impact on Bulgaria's economy was the disruption of their trade route to the west. They were on the far side of Serbia. Bulgaria's most direct path to Western European markets goes through Belgrade and that route was blocked. Bulgarian exports either had to go by ship through the Baltic and the Mediterranean, which takes too long, or had to go overland through Romania and Hungary. The logistics of moving Bulgarian products west greatly complicated their ability to profit from their own free market reforms. They also lost the Yugoslav market, itself a serious blow.

The Bulgarian government had other problems with the break-up of Yugoslavia. They were concerned about any spillover. As Bulgarians are close to the Macedonians in history and language, they were deeply concerned about the fate of Macedonia.

Q: Macedonia was thought to be threatened with a Serbian invasion. Was there any sympathy for the Serbs as fellow Orthodox Slavs?

PLOTKIN: There was some sympathy, even though Bulgaria and Serbia have also been at war with each other. There was no question of Bulgarians rushing to the border to sign up to fight with the Serbs. There was more sympathy for the Macedonians. Some Bulgarians think that Macedonia is part of Bulgaria. The borders in that part of the world have shifted enough times that almost anyone can make a historical claim on almost any piece of Balkan territory. There's hardly a patch of land that hasn't several claimants on it. Macedonia is one of those patches of land. Albania, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria surround Macedonia. It is easy to imagine that Macedonia could disappear in the blink of an eye, with each of those four countries grabbing what they somehow believe is rightly theirs. You could also imagine Macedonia expanding and taking over Northern Greece if you like. One of the things we were concerned to do throughout the region was to maintain stable borders and we did all we could to influence Balkan governments to accept current borders.

Q: We put a small force into Macedonia, didn't we?

PLOTKIN: I think it came to less than 1000 troops. They were basically a tripwire to make certain that the Serbs made no attempt to invade Macedonia or use Macedonia as a base to control Kosovo. They also served to help maintain stability between Macedonian Slavs and Macedonia Albanians by being there. They didn't interfere, but they were there.

Q: Did the Bulgarians support the Macedonian Slavs?

PLOTKIN: It wasn't a major issue because there was no major conflict going on in Macedonia, but certainly Bulgarian sympathies were the Slavic Macedonians.

Q: How about Greece?

PLOTKIN: Good relations by and large. While we were there two new border crossings were opened between Greece and Bulgaria, boosting trade between the two. There were some issues as well, but they weren't critical. One was the Greek denial and Bulgarian insistence that there exists a substantial Bulgarian-speaking minority in Greek Macedonia. Bulgaria also had concerns regarding its own minority populations. Ten percent of Bulgarian citizens are Turks, and there is a significant Roma minority.

Q: How was that played when you were there?

PLOTKIN: The situation was good in historic terms. Under the communists there was a major attempt to Slavicize the Turks, to force them to take Slavic names and speak only Bulgarian. It ended up causing a great many Bulgarian Turks to flee into Turkey, causing serious tension between the two countries. The Bulgarian Turks were the remnant of the Turks that occupied most of the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire. The Slavicization campaign died with the communist government. Under Bulgaria's new constitution, there are no second-class citizens, at least officially, and political parties are not allowed to have religious or ethnic identities. There is, however, what is in effect the Turkish party which has been able, after a couple of election, to make itself critical to the formation of coalition governments. It, thereby, wields influence greater than its size would suggest. The party is very careful to have both Slavic and Turkish Bulgarians in its leadership so that it can't be accused of being simply a Turkish party, but everybody knows where its principal sympathies lie.

While the Turkish minority continues to face some prejudice and is certainly less successful economically than Slavic Bulgarians, the Roma really live at the bottom of the economy of Bulgaria and are widely misunderstood and despised. Even they, however, have created NGOs to work their interests and which we are helping to sponsor. Most are involved in trying to move forward in the areas of Roma civil and land ownership rights.

Q: Were they settling down?

PLOTKIN: There are two groups of Roma in Bulgaria and throughout the region. A substantial number have settled, work their own land and living in stable communities. Others fit the

familiar stereotype of the caravan Gypsy.

Q: When I was in Belgrade, every time something didn't work you'd hear, "It's because we were 500 years under the Turkish yoke." Did the Bulgarians still play that card?

PLOTKIN: Yes, though I don't think they used that excuse as often as the Serbs did. In Serbia, you sometimes wanted to grab people by the shoulders, shake them and tell them to get over it. Put that history behind you. Don't forget it, but focus on what needs to be done now and don't simply blame all that's going wrong today on a 500 year Turkish domination that ended a century ago. That gets you nowhere. It doesn't even get you any sympathy from anybody except your neighbors who were also dominated.

Q: How about Romania?

PLOTKIN: Once they got rid of Ceausescu it was a changed place, but in terms of my responsibilities, Romania didn't figure strongly. The biggest problem is that Bulgarians and Romanians don't trust each other. There is still only one bridge across the Danube which runs almost the length of the border from East to West between the two countries. The reason there is one bridge is you can blow it up in a hurry, thus blocking the invading hordes from one side or the other. I can't think of any other reason, though there are many good economic reasons for having additional bridges. When we were there, studies were underway for a second bridge further to the West. A site was finally chosen, but frankly I don't know whether construction has begun or not. I've lost track of the issue.

Q: Was there much trade between the two?

PLOTKIN: Not as much as there should have been and at least partly limited by a lack of communication infrastructure between the two countries. You can only get so much traffic over one bridge in a day. All the alternative routes are longer and slower.

We were trying to open up borders in the region so that the Balkan countries, all relatively small, could begin to expand their markets and become more efficient producers of goods. Our success was limited. As I mentioned there were increased openings between Greece and Bulgaria, and Macedonia and Bulgaria had good economic relations. We were working on helping create better communication between Romania and Bulgaria, and I presume that, as things settle down in the former Yugoslavia, there will be greater opportunities for trade between Bulgaria and the various parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Q: How did you find dealing with Bulgarian government officials?

PLOTKIN: It was a mix, depending on which government was in power and on the level at which you were trying to communicate. For example, we had prepared an educational exchange agreement originally requested by the Bulgarian government. I drafted it very shortly after I got there. It was given the usual massage by the ambassador, by USIA and by the Department and everyone on our side was satisfied with it. After informal consultations, we presented it to our colleagues in the Ministry of Education for their comments, review and signature. Unfortunately,

before that process was completed, the socialists took over the government. Every few weeks over the next two years I was told I'd have the agreement signed and sealed in a couple of weeks. It never happened. Occasionally, a good working-level colleague in the ministry would say to me, "We're happy this agreement, but we can't get anybody at the top to sign off on it. The socialists simply didn't want to sign it, didn't want to go so far as to reject it, and so stonewalled."

Eight or ten months before we left, the socialists were thrown out and a center-right government took over again. Within a few weeks the agreement was finalized. To a large degree that was the pattern that we were stuck with as long as the socialists were in power. Their sympathies were not with us and while they didn't stop things from happening, they were excellent at stalling. At least they didn't try to take over AUBG and they didn't try to undermine the Fulbright commission. They simply weren't going to move things forward that didn't strike them as being enough in their favor, whether in Bulgaria's favor or not.

Q: Was this just old Marxist reflexes or were they anti-American at this stage of development?

PLOTKIN: I think there was some nostalgia for the old days. Remember, unlike the resentment felt in other Soviet Bloc countries that were invaded and occupied by Russia, the attitude in Bulgaria was very positive toward the Russians. Not only did they never occupy Bulgaria, they were key to the liberation of Bulgaria from the Turks. We and the center-right political parties were pushing ideas that would link Bulgaria more closely with the west, ranging from NATO and EU membership to a normalization of the legal status of the American University in Bulgaria. The Educational Exchange Agreement, for example, included language that recognized AUBG as a Bulgarian institution with the rights and responsibilities of a Bulgarian university. That was a major sticking point the socialists. They also knew that AUBG wasn't going to pull out and that it would cause an uproar were they to try to stop the university from operating. The best they could do was not to let anything further the legal status of the place.

Q: Was there overt hostility towards America in the government? At that time, U.S.-Russian relations were good.

PLOTKIN: There was no overt hostility. There were just people who just didn't want to cooperate with us as much as we would have liked and thought beneficial to Bulgaria. Like Russia, our troops have never been in Bulgaria, though there was some lingering resentment over U.S. bombing of Sofia toward the end of WWII. Remember, Bulgaria was allied with Germany.

Q: What was the feeling towards the European Union in Bulgaria? Toward NATO?

PLOTKIN: Among more forward looking Bulgarians, NATO and the EU were El Dorado. Bulgarians formed the first NATO non-governmental affiliate organization in Eastern Europe and began a campaign both with NATO and within Bulgaria for membership. Bulgaria's current foreign minister, Solomon Passy, who headed the organization, worked very closely with the Embassy. We had a program with NATO, as did other former bloc countries that allowed us to take two groups of 5-6 key contacts to Brussels for a NATO tour and briefing, with a side visit to the EU. Bulgaria was among the first members of NATO's Partners for Peace program, never officially dubbed a stepping stone to NATO membership, but seen as that by PfP members.

Bulgaria was among the earliest in the region to host joint exercises with NATO and later provided bases for our efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, where they also had a military presence. In fact, a Bulgarian was just killed by the terrorists in Iraq. There was so much enthusiasm for NATO, that even the socialists, when they were in power, had to pay lip service to it.

Bulgarians had an analogous attitude toward EU membership. They realized that as difficult as it would be to qualify for NATO membership, it would be a snap compared to the transition to the European Union. A huge number of Bulgarian laws had to be written or changed before they could be deemed serious candidates for the EU. Unofficially, as they saw PfP a step toward NATO membership, so did they see NATO membership as something identifying them as a serious participant in a very Western organization, crucial to the foreign policy, and a possible step toward the EU. Again, even the socialists had a grudging enthusiasm for both. The realists among them knew it was their future.

Q: Did Bulgarians compare their situation vis-à-vis the West to that of the other former Soviet bloc countries? Did they check their progress against that of the others?

PLOTKIN: To a certain degree, yes, and with some envy of places like Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic which were geographically closer to the West, had more direct experience with western institutions, and which were more affluent. Another great advantage that the Poles, Hungarians and, perhaps, the Czechs had was their successful and relatively wealthy immigrants in the U.S. and Western Europe, able and willing to provide them with capital and expertise. Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia have much less to draw on along those lines.

Bulgarians also watched what was happening in the aftermath of the various approaches to economic reform in the region. They chose a slow evolution to rewriting the economic rules in comparison to going cold turkey as did Poland. It may have been a mistake.

Q: Was there much of an entrepreneurial spirit in Bulgaria?

PLOTKIN: There was, but there were impediments to its expression. First, most of the major industrial institutions in the country had been manufacturing essentially second rate goods for the Soviet Bloc market which had no choice but to take what they could get. These plants found themselves suddenly unable to compete with products now available from the west. That led to rising unemployment as the plants shut down. One prime example was the computer industry which had been exporting computers from Bulgaria. Their computers weren't able to compete with Western quality computers.

Then there was a problem within the government itself as it tried to determine how to privatize government-owned business and at what pace. From our point of view, they moved too slowly and with far more influence of cronyism and organized crime than ought to have been allowed. It was a combination of an honest attempt to slow the growth of unemployment and wide-spread corruption.

The best of the entrepreneurial spirit was operating on a local, small business basis, but both the government and criminal elements thwarted expansion. Small businesses were constrained to

remain small to avoid paying a high rate of taxes and to avoid the notice of the criminal protection racket. A mom and pop store might hope to succeed in a modest way without much notice, but should it try to expand, open a second outlet, it was put at risk. There was a strong disincentive to expanding your Starbucks nationwide.

Q: Was there any sort of McDonaldsization in Bulgaria?

PLOTKIN: There was a fast food invasion. McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, and Mr. Donut all had outlets in Sofia when we were there, and they were expanding throughout the country. There was, to my knowledge, no equivalent Bulgarian fast food chain that could successfully compete.

Q: You mentioned the man who led the movement for NATO membership, Solomon Passy. Is he Jewish and is there much of a Jewish community there?

PLOTKIN: He is. The Bulgarian Jewish community is small today though Bulgarian Jews largely survived WWII and the Nazis. Depending on who spins history, you hear different views of the actions of Bulgaria regarding its Jewish population in the Second World War. As I mentioned earlier, Bulgaria, largely for regional political reasons, was an ally of Germany. The Bulgarian Jewish population was identified and isolated during the Second World War and there was some forced labor. But Germany never occupied Bulgaria; they were allies and the Bulgarian royal family was of German origin. As a result, Bulgaria's WWII history was the opposite of that experienced by Yugoslavia.

Bulgaria did have to cooperate with the Nazis and was, it seems, perfectly willing to send the very substantial Jewish population of what is now Macedonian Greece to the death camps. However, when it came to Bulgarian Jews, despite the fact that they were being abused within Bulgaria at the time, when the Nazis ordered their shipment to the death camps, there were protests, led partly by the Bulgarian Orthodox church and partly by civic minded people. In brief, they refused to cooperate and Bulgaria's Jewish population survived the Germans and the war.

The community is small now because after the war and the communist takeover, many moved either to Israel or west. There is something of a Jewish revival today. When we were there, they were working to complete the restoration of the main synagogue in Sofia and had a rededication ceremony attended by everyone from the president of Bulgaria and the head of the Bulgarian Orthodox church to members of the Israeli Parliament and our ambassador, Avis Bohlen. As it is an Orthodox synagogue, she and Ruth had to sit upstairs, while I was among the all male dignitaries in the front rows. The event was given very positive front page coverage in the media.

As a Jew in the Foreign Service I've had really seen two extremes in Eastern Europe. In Poland, I always felt a basic anti-Semitism. I don't accuse all Poles because that would be insane, but more than once I had the sentiment quoted to me that, while Hitler was awful, at least he solved the Jewish problem. In contrast, early in my tour in Belgrade I was backstage at one of the major theater companies there talking to a group of actors and directors. Afterwards one of the actresses came up to me and said, "Are you Jewish?" I said, "Yes." She embraced me and said, "My grandmother was Jewish." I had this kind of experience eight or a dozen times in Serbia and

Bulgaria. There simply was a very different attitude. No doubt there were Serbs and Bulgarians there who thought of Jews as Christ killers, but overall there was an acceptance of Jews as a part of the scene and of value. I think this was largely bred by that hated 500 years of the Ottoman Empire. It was the Ottoman Empire that accepted almost all of the Jews thrown out of Iberia in 1492. Most ended up the Balkans and accommodation to living under the Ottomans made it possible for Jews and Orthodox Christians to live together in ways that never worked as well in the Protestant and Catholic west.

Q: Was Bulgaria a tourist destination? I think of the Black Sea and the beaches.

PLOTKIN: Bulgaria is a beautiful country, with mountains, beautiful rivers, the sea and its beaches. It has great tourism potential. People who come there tend to be surprised by its beauty and by the hospitality of the Bulgarian people. For us, it was clearly the most hospitable place we ever served. It was the country where we most quickly went from being invited because we were the political counselor or the counselor for public affairs to being invited because we were Ruth and Larry. We have sustained friendships from there more than from anyplace else. Bulgarians will spend so much of their resources entertaining you that you almost wince at the level of hospitality.

Q: How did you cope as a guest being loaded with food with more food than you eat?

PLOTKIN: It was both wonderful and sometimes overwhelming. You did the best of course to reciprocate, of course. Bulgaria is not well known in the West. The bulk of their tourists have been from the northern part of the Soviet Bloc, Poles, Germans and Russians seeking sunshine. Until they have better infrastructure to bring people into the country, I think it will stay that way. You can fly in and out of Sofia easily, but travel elsewhere can be difficult. They also need to up-grade the resort facilities you find once you get to the beach or mountains.

Q: Back to Jews, were they largely Sephardic?

PLOTKIN: Yes. Most of them came from Spain and Portugal. There were Ashkenazi Jews who had immigrated from places like Russia, but they were the minority within the minority. In fact, I had occasion to use my Spanish in Bulgaria on a couple of occasions when I met older Sephardic Jews still spoke Ladino which relates to Spanish in a way similar to the relation between Yiddish and German. I could be understood in Spanish and understand much of their Ladino.

Q: We haven't talked about Russian influence. Was there much Russian influence there?

PLOTKIN: Nothing like it had been of course. As I said earlier, Bulgarians have never had an incentive to hate the Russians. Just the opposite. They appreciate Russia for its role in ending the control of the Balkans by the Turks and, unlike other countries in the region, were had Russian troops on their land.

Q: When the Russian troops came through Yugoslavia, they raped and looted.

PLOTKIN: I know, but that never happened in Bulgaria. The result is that their relationship was

and remains good. Obviously the relationship has changed because Bulgaria is both dealing with a changed Russia and also with a variety of other countries with which they share the Black Sea. One of the other things which involved the Embassy from behind the scenes was the development of a Black Sea cooperative organization bringing the countries bordering the Black Sea into an organization to deal with everything from transportation to pollution of the sea.

Q: Were you there during the street demonstrations?

PLOTKIN: They marched right by my office everyday. I would look out of my window and people who knew me would wave. One of the real influences on the Bulgarian opposition was the student movement in Belgrade which was in the streets before and during the same time period. As Ruth said, they showed Bulgarians that they could change things in an extra legal fashion through peaceful demonstrations. The Bulgarians took their cue from that and even emulated some of the semi-comical street theater that the students were doing in Belgrade. It was peaceful and good-spirited, with the exception of one night at the parliament building in Sofia where the face-off between police and demonstrators turned violent. Ruth and I just missed the action. We had been there mingling in the crowd and observing. We left an hour or so before things got hot.

Q: What happened?

PLOTKIN: People took over the parliament building, began to ransack it and inspired the inevitable police response. It was a little bit messy, a few people were hurt, but no one was killed. It was nothing like it could have been because the Bulgarian army decided to remain neutral and by remaining neutral allowed the political process to take place without interfering. That was very much a good thing.

Q: How did we view this? Did we welcome a change or did we not give a damn?

PLOTKIN: Professionally and officially we kept our distance and stayed neutral. As individuals and as an organization we were all rooting for the change. We were not getting the cooperation we thought we ought to have from the socialists and could see a bad economic situation was getting worse. We looked forward to a government that we could better partner and that would move forward Bulgaria's reforms and Westernization, prosperity, the rule of law. We never spoke out publicly in favor of a change of government, but among ourselves our sympathies were clear.

Q: By the time you left, was a new government in place and did it work better?

PLOTKIN: Yes and yes. One example was the educational exchange agreement I mentioned earlier. And there were others. There was a Peace Corps agreement that had also been in suspension. There was new movement on such agreements and certainly a major change just in the atmospherics of doing business with the new government. It affected the Embassy and it affected other western institutions in Bulgaria like AUBG and the American college. Did Ruth or I mention the American college?

Q: You mentioned the American University.

PLOTKIN: They are two different and separate institutions, AUBG and the American College. The College is a high school that was started in Sofia in the 1860s. It was founded by the same people who founded Roberts College in Istanbul, and, like Roberts College, was an elite high school, the school to which the wealthiest Bulgarians sent their kids. World War II caused the school to suspend operation and the communist government that followed shut it down. But the religious association that ran the college kept its small endowment intact. In the interim the college campus was turned over to the interior ministry which, you understand, was not the home of tree huggers but rather that of the domestic police. In 1990 or '91, after the communists were deposed, the board of the American College approached the new, democratically elected government and asked for their campus back, arguing that it had been taken from them illegally. A compromise was reached that gave them back about half of the campus. They restored the first of the building returned to them and took in their first students in fall 1993, 100 ninth graders. They were chosen, not now for their wealth, but through an open, merit-based competition, the only pre-competition criterion was to have a class that was 50 young men and 50 young women. Each year thereafter they brought in another 100 students for a total of 400. The school is secular, classes are all, at least in theory, taught in English, but the curriculum is that of the Bulgarian school system.

When we were assigned to Sofia, we thought that our older daughter, Anya, would go to school there, but there were problems from the beginning. They ranged from the fact that she was not strong in the sciences and she was entering as a 10th grader and, therefore, behind the curve, to the fact that the math textbook was in Bulgarian and the Bulgarian students were xenophobic and were not inclined to accept the presence of non-Bulgarian students in the college. At the end of one semester and with great sadness we transferred her to the TASIS School just outside of London. She had an emotionally difficult first semester having come in midway through the 10th grade, but then a wonderfully successful 11th and 12th grades.

The silver lining was the plus for our younger daughter, Alison. She spent her first year in Sofia in the Anglo-American school which ran through the 8th grade, and then went on to the College – with two major advantages. She was stronger in math and sciences and she entered as a 9th grader with a whole new group of students from all around Bulgaria, all strangers to each other. She had little social problem as a foreigner and with some help from a math and physics tutor, she finished two years at the College with a 5.6 grade average out of 6. When we returned to the States, she asked us to make her high school graduation present a trip back to Bulgaria.

Half the teachers at the College were American and half Bulgarian. As I said, they taught the standard Bulgarian high school curriculum, which meant 12 different subjects a week. Students took physics, chemistry, biology and geology all four years, not a year of one and a year of the other. In addition, they studied three languages, Bulgarian, English and a foreign language. And they took courses in literature and mathematics and a couple electives. It was very intense, but it enabled Alison to come back to Fairfax County and be in the first cohort at George Marshall High School to study for the international baccalaureate, IB, degree. Of the 25 kids who started out in the program, she was one of only nine who finished the program and earned the IB degree. Both of our daughters did very well academically, had great SAT scores. As a footnote, the first

graduating class of the American College in 1997 had an average SAT score higher than that of the entering class of Harvard that year, and, of course, took the exam in English, not Bulgarian.

RUTH E. HANSEN
Political/Economic Counselor
Sofia (1994-1997)

Ruth E. Hansen was born on February 18, 1946 in Illinois. She received her BA from Wheaton College in 1968 and her MSFS from Georgetown University in 1970. Her career has included positions in the Dominican Republic, Poland, Panama, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. Ms. Hansen was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy on June 21, 2004.

Q: After the one year in S/CT, you went into Bulgarian language training?

HANSEN: Yes, Larry and I had bid on and been assigned to excellent jobs in Sofia, Larry as Public Affairs Counselor and I as Political-Economic Counselor. At the time that we bid, Bulgaria was at one of its sporadic high points in its post-communist transition, so we were very optimistic about the assignments and excited about the opportunity to serve again in the Balkans, under more promising circumstances than at the end of our Belgrade tour. By the time we finished language training and got to Sofia, Bulgaria had slid downward from that high point and shortly moved into a disastrous period of mismanagement by the former communists, under a government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party.

Q: Before we going further, let's start with the language training. How did you find the Bulgarian language?

We were in language training from the late summer of 1993 until the spring of 1994. Actually, Larry had to finish up a little early and go out to post a little ahead of schedule. The Bulgarian language has a really interesting historical background, basic to the development of the Cyrillic alphabet which spread widely in the region. At first, I didn't expect to like the language because I'd heard it spoken and always thought it sounded rather unattractive, compared to Serbo-Croatian and even Polish, which I'd come to appreciate years ago. In the end, once I got used to it, I thought that Bulgarian also was a very attractive language. It is probably the simplest of the Slavic languages. It isn't declined, like Polish and Serbo-Croatian, though it has a remnant of declension with the article attached at the end of the word. Pronunciation can be tricky in terms of where the stress falls in a word. The language always seemed erratic in that respect. The other tricky thing was body language. In Bulgarian, as in Greek and Albanian, and perhaps other languages, you nod your head for "no" and shake your head for "yes." That was hard to get used to, and it was easy to make mistakes. I had thought, having background in Serbo-Croatian, that learning Bulgarian would be quite easy. The similarities of the languages did help at first, but the advantages didn't hold up that long. Learning Bulgarian was still a major challenge. Larry and I were often in class together, and we both did well in the language

There were several Bulgarian language instructors at FSI; a couple of them were quite strong. One was a lovely and very dedicated woman who unfortunately passed away a couple of years later. Another was a Bulgarian Orthodox priest by training. He sometimes let his understandably strong anti-communist and other political views enter into the classroom. The course of instruction was not as strong as the Serbo-Croatian course had been, though one of the instructors in particular occasionally used some innovative approaches, including the use of broadcast media.

Once we were in Bulgaria, I found that, even though it had been a number of years since I used Serbo-Croatian, I still would resort to Serbian words occasionally by mistake. If I couldn't think of the Bulgarian word, the Serbian word might come to mind. I used to make the joke that I spoke Bulgarian with a lot of Serbian words, which meant that I really spoke Macedonian. The Bulgarians thought that was very funny, since in their heart of hearts many of them considered Macedonian an artificial language contrived by Tito's Yugoslav regime, and thought that it was really Bulgarian anyway. Knowing Bulgarian, in fact I could understand Macedonian. Once while visiting Macedonia, the Bulgarian president made a statement on TV, and it was interpreted simultaneously into Macedonian. The two versions were extremely close; it was almost like hearing the same thing said twice.

Q: So, you were in Bulgaria from when to when?

HANSEN: From the summer of 1994 to the summer of 1997.

I was the Political-Economic Counselor. We had a small section of five people including a secretary, one of these combined political and economic units. We had a good and cohesive staff. There were a couple of guys in the section when I arrived who had been in Bulgaria for a couple of years, so they knew and understood the situation and the dynamics of Bulgarian political and economic developments really well. A year later two new officers came in who got up to speed really quickly and did a great job.

The ambassador at first was Ambassador William Montgomery, for about the first year-and-a-half that we were at post. He then was called upon to return to Washington to work on Balkan reconstruction and Serbian reform. After about a six-month hiatus, Ambassador Avis Bohlen arrived and was there past our departure.

Q: What was the situation in Bulgaria when you arrived?

HANSEN: It was not going very well. Over a period of about a decade altogether, Bulgaria had a kind of circular political development in which it would make some progress towards democratic reform and market economics. Then things would fall apart and progress would cease or be walked back. We arrived in one of these downturns in the cycle. The communist system as such had collapsed at the end of 1989, and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) was formed, while the old communist party re-shaped itself as the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). There was also a key political structure reflecting Bulgaria's substantial Turkish minority, the Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF).

By the summer of 1994 the Union of Democratic Forces that had been in office for several years. They had a kind of a coalition with the ethnic Turkish party, the Movement for Rights and Freedom. Zhelyu Zhelev was the president. This coalition had collapsed by the time that we got there, though the government had not yet fallen. There had been a lot of speculation over the preceding year or so about whether and when Parliament would take up a vote of confidence in the government and thus whether and when there would be new elections. The vote of confidence had been sidestepped several times. Very shortly after we arrived in fact the government did fail and new elections were called in short order. So the situation was quite dramatic right from the start. There had been a lot of skepticism in the embassy as to whether new elections would ever be called, because it would be such a dangerous situation for this Union of Democratic Forces. It was not at all clear that they would do well. By the time we arrived, though, it seemed pretty obvious to me that there was no other way out, given the constitutional structure and the way things were sorting out politically. In the end, new parliamentary elections were held and the Socialist Party, the former communists, won.

During that period in Bulgaria, political figures all along the political spectrum, despite protestations to the contrary, had their short-term interests at the fore. Whoever was in office tried to do things for themselves, for their group, and to change the system to their own benefit, not necessarily the benefit of the country overall. This was true of the democratic forces, many of whom wanted basically to turn the country back to the way it was before the communists took power, as well as the Socialists. There was an element of a kind of class division. The old elites of the country wanted to get their homes back, get their farmland back, and so forth. It was understandable that they would demand restitution, but the property issues were handled poorly, especially regarding agricultural lands, orchards, and vineyards, so that there were many property disputes and potentially rich agricultural lands were left to deteriorate. Bulgaria ended up importing a lot of foodstuffs that it should have been able to produce by itself. It had been a breadbasket for Eastern Europe during the communist period, and it lost that capacity. I don't know that it has fully recovered even now. There had been a significant Peasant Party in Bulgaria prior to World War II, and the remnants and new members of that party were components of the Union of Democratic Forces.

In 1994 there was no consensus as to where the country was headed, and it took a good three more years and a major economic collapse under the Socialists for that consensus to develop. But more about that later.

In those early post-communist years, although the UDF was to our minds right-thinking in terms of basic democratic principals, economic reform, aspirations to western institutions, and so forth, as a practical matter they were not doing a good job of instituting reform in the country. It was a very frustrating situation. Then, when the UDF finally lost political power, the Socialists came in and tried to turn back the UDF-backed reforms, such as they were. It was a very messy situation, the country just was not making progress, and the economy was suffering as a result.

All the economies of Eastern Europe went into pretty serious slumps after the communist system fell because all of their structures fell apart and there was nothing really there to replace them. Bulgaria was one of the lesser developed countries of the Eastern Bloc to begin with, and it was less experienced in even a modicum of international trade and international business, so it was

starting from farther behind and was worse off than countries like Poland and Hungary. Romania and Bulgaria were at the tail end. They did not do very well in instituting new systems that would let their economies thrive. It was not a good situation, and there really was not a strong clear leader who could create a vision for the country.

President Zhelev was a leader among the democratic forces and was president for the first couple of years we were in Sofia. He had emerged from the environmental movement in Bulgaria, where a nascent opposition had been able to function in a minimal way in the latter part of the 1980s. He showed vision at the beginning and was very well regarded by the United States, probably for longer than he really deserved, given his overall performance. Over time, he lost his ability to compel support among Bulgarians. His original mission got mired down in the politics of his own democratic cohort if you will, some of it having to do with personal rivalries and also with the role of the ethnic Turkish party, the MRF. When Zhelev's term was up, he ran for re-election and won only a minuscule portion of the vote. So that reflects how far he had fallen.

Q: How communized had the Bulgaria under the old rule? Did they have large collective farms and all that?

HANSEN: Yes, they did. Bulgaria was pretty thoroughly Sovietized and very close to Moscow politically. Bulgaria was often semi-jokingly referred to as the 16th Soviet republic because it was the most loyal of the Eastern Bloc countries. On the other hand, there were no Soviet troops stationed in Bulgaria. There were a couple of ways to look at that. Some Bulgarians liked to say that they were clever enough to keep the Soviet troops out. Others looked at it as a reflection of how confident Moscow was in Bulgaria's cooperation, that they didn't need to have troops there. There was at least one very positive outcome from this situation, in that Bulgaria did not have to cope, as most other bloc countries did, with issues surrounding a withdrawal of Soviet troops. Those were difficult and contentious issues elsewhere, and at least Bulgaria was spared that.

One way or the other, the relationship between Bulgaria and the USSR was qualitatively different from the relationships of the other Warsaw Pact countries with the Soviet Union. Bulgaria and Russia were close historically, and there were strong cultural links between the two countries. Most Bulgarians speak Russian, and the languages are very close. According to the Bulgarians, and I think it's accurate, the Russian Cyrillic alphabet derived from the Bulgarian. Among Bulgarians, there was no innate hostility towards Russians as there was, say, in Poland. That's speaking historically. Of course the relationship with Russia did get to be very problematic post-1989, largely because of Russia's economic influence in Bulgaria and the operation of Russian criminal groups.

In addition to agricultural production, one of Bulgaria's main roles in the Eastern Bloc was in the computer field. Bulgaria was home to much of the computer development in the bloc, and its expertise was quite genuine. On the positive side, this meant that Bulgarians were highly competent in applying computer technology to certain aspects of, say, defense reform. On the negative side, for a while you would hear that the "best" computer hackers operated out of Bulgaria.

Q: By the time you had arrived there they had started de-collectivizing and redistributing

farmlands?

HANSEN: Yes, as I mentioned, that was one of the challenges that the UDF did not handle well when it came into office post-1989. The slow and ineffective pace of economic reform and privatization was an issue all during the period we served in Bulgaria. Much of the U.S. assistance program was directed toward economic reform, and a lot of it was applied in the municipalities. In some of the cities and towns around the country, it was possible to have some impact, while progress was so slow at the national level.

Q: When you arrived there, what were the U.S.-Bulgarian issues?

HANSEN: Looking narrowly at Bulgaria in and of itself, the direct U.S. interests were minimal, frankly. There was no reason to take a particular economic interest in Bulgaria, U.S.-Bulgarian trade was very modest, and the Bulgarian community in the United States was small. It was one of those situations in which, if things were going well, Bulgaria could easily have been taken for granted. But there was potential for things to go quite wrong in Bulgaria, in which case there could be serious fall-out. So, it's sad to say in a way, but the United States had a sort of negative interest in Bulgaria.

For example, Serbia, or the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), was under U.S. and international sanctions at the time because of the Yugoslav conflicts. The U.S. and the international community generally needed Bulgaria and other countries surrounding the old Yugoslavia to implement the sanctions, particularly to prevent oil supplies to Belgrade. We had a lot of issues with Bulgaria regarding the oil boycott, and the situation was similar with Romania and Macedonia. A gray market and even a black market, particularly in the oil trade, came into operation in the region and undermined the sanctions. These were constant issues in the relationship. A portion of U.S. assistance had to be devoted to helping Bulgaria do what it needed to do, with mixed results.

The situation was similar on export controls generally. Arms manufacture had been an important industry in Bulgaria under communism, and Bulgaria was part of the network that supplied arms to a number of nations around the world, including pariah states. Bulgaria professed to want to get this trade under control and in line with Western standards, but it had a very hard time doing so, even when it tried. I don't think we were convinced that it always tried. The U.S. worked with and pressed Bulgaria on developing an effective export control system, and we did see some progress there eventually. But given the level of illegal activity in Bulgaria, control over trade in munitions and military equipment was elusive, even with the best of intentions.

Protection of intellectual property rights (IPR) was another perennial issue in the relationship. Shortly after we arrived in Bulgaria, we took our teen-age kids to explore downtown Sofia, and they wanted to buy some cassette tapes. So I gave them the equivalent of about \$10, and to my surprise they came back with a handful of tapes, they were so cheap. It turned out, of course, that they were pirated products, so we had to cut out buying up illegal merchandise. Beyond cassettes, Bulgaria was awash in pirated videos, computer software, CDs. As a result, IPR and the "watch list" were major issues on the bilateral agenda.

Looking at the larger picture, however, the U.S. took a strong interest in all the countries of Eastern Europe in democratic and market reform, improved respect for human rights, defense reform and civilian control over the military, and responsible roles in their relations with their neighbors. We supported their movement towards eventual NATO and EU membership. Bulgaria was very much a part of this larger picture, of building a Europe “whole and free”.

Much of our political engagement and the bulk of our assistance were dedicated to supporting these goals. As I’ve mentioned, Bulgaria faced some real challenges in implementing meaningful economic reform. It was also difficult for them to get a handle on judicial reform. In some areas of democratic reform Bulgaria performed quite well. From the beginning, the Bulgarians figured out how to run elections efficiently and well. They were great on the process of conducting the voting in a free and fair manner. They did the job well technically. Unfortunately, the political realities behind the elections meant that the results were not that helpful, because they did not foster the development of a political consensus about the country’s direction. The pendulum would simply swing back and forth between the UDF and the Socialists.

Most of the electoral reform and political party development was helped along significantly by the excellent work of the American political party institutes, NDI and IRI. They did just a tremendous job. About halfway through our tour, there came time for a presidential election, when President Zhelev’s term was up. The democratic forces, from which Zhelev arose originally, were having a terrible time agreeing on a candidate to put forward. By then, Zhelev was very much on the outs among the pro-democracy parties. In the end, the IRI advised them on running a primary election, which Zhelev lost. The winner in the primary election went on to win the presidency and served very respectably. It turned out to be a very healthy process for that group of democratic forces because it forced them to work together and brought to the fore a candidate who might not have been considered otherwise. This was quite exciting to see, for the novelty effect if nothing else. As far as I know, it was the only primary election ever conducted in Eastern Europe, though I couldn’t say for sure.

Bulgarians were also very successful in another area of democratization, that of forming non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for advocacy and action in various areas of political and social concern. Not to detract from Bulgarians’ sincerity or to begrudge them the assistance they received, but international aid funding was quite readily available to support NGO formation and operation, so it was very much encouraged from the outside. Sometimes it almost seemed like a kind of a job creation program, in that assistance supported management and leadership positions in the NGOs, essentially providing income for people who might have had minimal income otherwise. The embassy had Democracy Commission funds to support NGO development. Our funding often was used to equip NGOs with computer equipment. Ironically, this meant that the NGOs we were supporting had computer set-ups far superior to what we had in the embassy, where we were still muddling along with stand-alone Wang PCs. The last year I was in Bulgaria, the Political-Economic Section had one unclassified e-mail terminal, which usually took over a day to transmit to or receive messages from the State Department.

In terms of relations with neighbors, one key issue for Bulgaria was its relationship with Macedonia. To its credit Bulgaria, at the instigation of President Zhelev, I believe, was the first to recognize an independent Macedonia. This was an issue for Bulgaria, because historically

Bulgaria considered Macedonia simply to be a geographic territory of Bulgaria, not a separate country, and Macedonians to really be Bulgarian, not a separate national identity. On the surface, Bulgaria accepted the reality of an independent Macedonian state early on. However, for many years there was a sub-text, to the effect that "... but everyone knows that Macedonia is really Bulgarian." They probably are well past that point by now.

There were also outstanding issues with Romania, Greece, and Turkey. The treatment and status of Bulgaria's ethnic Turkish minority – about 10% of the population – was occasionally an issue, including in terms of human rights. Towards the end of the communist period, there had been a major campaign against the Turkish minority, requiring that they Bulgarianize their names, among other things. Many ethnic Turks fled to Turkey at that time, so that was a nasty legacy to try to overcome and it took some time. As in other countries of the region, the status and treatment of the Roma minority was of concern.

Q: How did you find dealing with the government?

HANSEN: When the Socialists were in office, our dealings could sometimes be quite difficult, as the Socialists at that time were not fully signed on to the goals of integration with Western institutions. Under the Socialists, for example, we had to press the Foreign Ministry quite hard on some UN human rights issues. The UDF governments were more amenable goal-wise, but they couldn't necessarily accomplish everything they set out to do.

Here's an example that illustrates the very dramatic change that occurred, even over just the short time we were in Bulgaria. Right after the fall of the communist regime, one of the political figures to emerge among the democratic forces was a gentleman named Solomon Passi. He was elected to Parliament and made a statement early on that Bulgaria should join NATO. Few believed that would ever be possible; even some of his own political colleagues were skeptical. Even if Bulgaria decided it wanted to join NATO, would NATO want Bulgaria as a member? Wouldn't it be terribly costly for Bulgaria to join NATO, given the reform and modernization of the Bulgarian military that would be required? Did Bulgaria really need NATO membership anyway? What was the threat to Bulgaria at that stage?

However, NATO membership, as well as eventual EU membership, was adopted as a basic goal for the democratic forces. Over time even the Socialists came onboard with the idea. Bulgaria has now joined NATO, and ironically a Socialist was president at the time. So in the space of just over a decade, Bulgaria achieved that major transformation in its outlook and orientation. It took a long time to get there and it was quite phenomenal that they could do it. I think the global war on terrorism and the U.S. military action in Afghanistan helped Bulgaria make part of the leap, because Bulgaria made a political decision to support the United States in the war on terrorism. They provided an air refueling facility for American planes flying over to Afghanistan, for example. So, they took a number of very difficult decisions that I think really opened the way for the United States to support their NATO membership.

In contrast, shortly before I arrived in Bulgaria in 1994, there had been a huge political issue about whether American troops could be supported by a train passing through Bulgaria into Macedonia where we had peacekeepers stationed for a while. It was simply supplies, not

armaments or anything. That practically caused the UDF government to fall, when all the parliament had to deal with was issuing approval for a supply train to pass through the country with non-lethal equipment. Ten years later the Bulgarians allowed and supported refueling operations for military aircraft going into combat. That's a real turn-around. It's been very gratifying to see that a country like Bulgaria could make such a huge turn and bring itself around to such a different point of view.

Q: How open did you find the press, and people generally?

HANSEN: It was hard at times. I must say it was hard. We had served the four years in Belgrade and we sort of thought we knew and understood the Balkans. I think we expected to find a lot of similarities between Bulgaria and Serbia, so we were a little bit surprised, I think, by how hard it was, initially, to settle in to Bulgaria and to begin to feel comfortable and get a feel for the country and its people. Things were quite different in Bulgaria, I would say. It was kind of a hostile environment when we first arrived. There was not necessarily a lot of overt, anti-American sentiment, but somehow you just didn't really feel comfortable. You didn't feel like you were being welcomed, although some individuals would be very warm and friendly and some of our contacts were very welcoming. We just generally felt a little uncomfortable. It was a difficult transition for the whole family. Sofia was very run-down in areas, streets were in terrible disrepair, garbage pick-up was a serious problem, stripped and rusting cars decorated our neighborhood where we were housed for the first six months, shopping for food was difficult. Overall, whereas I always would give myself a good six months to begin to feel comfortable in a new country, it took me a little longer in Bulgaria.

Once we did begin to feel more comfortable, and maybe it was also a function of change going on in the country, we ended up having a wonderful time there. We probably had more personal friends in Bulgaria than we had in any other post. Either we had to change and adjust more than we expected or maybe even the country changed during the time we were there. I think it did actually. The people did develop a sense of self-confidence in dealing with foreigners, so I think there was a kind of change in the psychology of the country during the period that we happened to be there. We ended up having a wonderful time and feeling very comfortable and very much welcomed, but it was hard at the beginning, partly, I think, because we erroneously anticipated that it would be so easy.

Q: How did the socialists conduct themselves while they were in office?

HANSEN: They were in office most of the time that we were in Bulgaria, as it turned out. While some individuals were charming, they could be a very unpleasant group. There was a lot of infighting among the Socialists, and among the democratic forces as well, for that matter. But the Socialists were probably at more of an extreme. It was very factional. A good number of the Socialists never really set aside their communist way of thinking and behaving. It was not a real enlightened group of leaders there, really, on either side. The Socialists were very easy to distrust. There were also a lot of personality conflicts, really very serious personality and personal conflicts, among members of both groups. One key figure in the Socialist Party, who was a major player in the palace coup that deposed the communist regime, was Andrei Lukanov, who towards the end of our tour was assassinated outside his apartment building in broad

daylight in a rather ordinary residential neighborhood. An embassy family lived in the same building. The shooting was thought to have been carried out by Russian Mafia business ties. I believe that arrests were finally made and a trial held in just the last couple of years. It was a very brutal set of circumstances. A number of the Socialist leaders were thought to have Mafia ties or otherwise be involved with nefarious business activities.

At that time, the Bulgarian economy was doing poorly. Of the relatively little business activity going on, much of it was tied up with what was loosely called Mafia circles. There was a lot of gray market activity. As I mentioned, one of the issues at the time was the international economic boycott of Yugoslavia, especially the oil embargo. Bulgaria and the other countries surrounding Yugoslavia always said that their economies suffered greatly because of the Yugoslavian embargo. It hindered their economic development and interrupted their trade patterns and so forth. That was certainly true to some extent. But I think the real damage was in the opportunities presented by the embargo for smuggling and gray market economic activity to circumvent the embargo. These developments further distorted an economy that was already seriously disrupted. Just as the country was trying to move to a market economy, the people could see that so much illegal economic activity was underway and that criminal circles were benefiting the most from the fall of communism. This undeservedly gave market economics a pretty bad name.

Q: How did the Bulgarians relate to the Yugoslav conflict?

HANSEN: They seemed to have somewhat ambiguous feelings about it. They paid lip service to the general international policy towards Yugoslavia and the position that the economic sanctions had to be maintained until the conflict ended. At the same time, they seemed to feel ambivalent because of the international involvement in the old Yugoslavia. They were not comfortable with such international "intervention". They wanted the conflict to end but were uncomfortable with outside military action to bring it to an end.

Q: Were you noticing a gap between the young people and the older people?

HANSEN: Oh, absolutely. This was a very interesting thing to see in terms of the political development and the various elections that took place. Bulgaria was suffering some serious demographic problems. It's a rather small country, a population of only 8 or 9 million in 1989-90 and declining in population as people emigrated overseas looking for better economic opportunities. There was a dramatic population drain after 1989, plus a low birth rate. So, its population was declining. The youth were generally very pessimistic about their chances for a decent life in Bulgaria, rightly so because things were not looking good at all. They generally supported reform, and the pro-reform parties had a younger base. The older generation was very much of the old communist mind set and very sympathetic to the Socialist Party. At one point in the context of one of the elections, the International Republican Institute did some excellent polling that showed how disenchanted the population was. There was a great deal of disappointment in Bulgaria's progress, or lack thereof, in the post-communist period, and a broad consensus that Bulgaria was not going in the right direction, that people had not reaped the benefits of democracy that they thought would come so quickly after 1989. People evidenced a lot of disillusionment and unhappiness at how the country was faring in the mid-1990s. In fact,

many people came to the conclusion, especially the older voters, that they were better off under communism. By this time, the Socialists were in office and part of the reason for Bulgaria's poor conditions was bad government by the Socialists. But the democratic forces were the ones held accountable, and they paid the price for that. They were seen as responsible for not carrying out the promise of reform. In the end, the Socialists benefited for a time from widespread disillusionment post-1989.

Q: How did the Socialists deal with all these reform advisers that were coming in from the United States and Europe? Were they dismissive?

HANSEN: They were, and they basically didn't work with the advisers. While the Socialists were in power at the national level, we ended up steering a lot of our assistance to the municipal level, where there was more receptivity. You could often find more pro-reform mayors and local leadership.

Q: Was the United States seen, then, as in some ways supporting the opposition? Didn't the embassy have to be careful about that, to avoid the appearance of interference in domestic politics?

HANSEN: We did have to be careful about that, obviously. We always cast our assistance as support for democratic and market reform, and always said we would support those who were committed to working for reform.

So, as a practical matter, yes, we ended up supporting the opposition in a sense while the Socialists were in office. I think we were pretty successful in maintaining our credibility, however. It was not really an issue.

But here's a curious example. I mentioned that the democratic forces held a primary election campaign to choose their presidential candidate at one point. USAID to its credit was concerned about the United States being seen as supporting the opposition by advising them, through IRI, on running this primary election. USAID insisted, and rightly so, that the same kind of offer be made to the Socialists, to keep things even. As the Political-Economic Counselor, I volunteered to take on this somewhat unsavory task. So I went and met with a top Socialist Party official; I think it was the chairman of the party. I explained the assistance we were providing to the opposition on a primary campaign, and offered to do likewise for the Socialists. Of course, we were pretty confident that they would decline the offer, and they did. What was interesting was that, later on, several political leaders in the Socialist party complained that we were helping the democratic forces with their election campaign. Fortunately I was able to say, well, we offered the same kind of assistance to the Socialists and we were not taken up on it. It became obvious that word of the U.S. offer had never been filtered down within Socialist Party ranks. The top official had kept it to himself, and nobody else ever knew that we had offered it until they asked us about it. So it was a very good thing to be able to say that we made the offer and had not been taken up on it. Actually, I rather enjoyed that.

On balance, as mentioned, I think our credibility was good.

Q: Were any of the Socialists representing a newer generation of socialism in the European sense?

HANSEN: As in Social Democrats?

Q: Yes.

HANSEN: Yes, there were some. There was a small Social Democratic Party, comprised largely of former Socialists, which expanded somewhat while we were there, drawing increased membership from the Socialist ranks. It was a small party and never fared very well in elections, but they were very respectable. There were others in the Socialist Party who I wouldn't call really enlightened, but they were pragmatic enough to make some fairly good decisions and, in fact, at least one very astute decision.

I'm jumping ahead here, to the last year that I was in Bulgaria, really the last six months. By the end of 1996-early 1997, the Socialists had been in office for a couple of years. They just ran the economy into the ground. There was hyper-inflation and high unemployment. There were bread shortages, really serious bread shortages and shortages of food generally. They were selling off the flour that the country produced, leaving too little for the domestic market. People were in bread lines; soup kitchens were started up, at least one of them supported by the embassy community.

Then, at about the same time – it must have been in December of 1996 - there were major street protests in Belgrade against the Milosevic regime. For I don't know how many days in a row there were major street protests against Milosevic in Belgrade. Some of the democratic leaders from Bulgaria went to Belgrade and at one point took part in the marches with them. They came back to Sofia and managed to pull off something similar in Sofia. For about a month or more, the democratic forces ran massive street protests in Sofia and eventually in other cities, calling for the removal of the Socialists. In Sofia, there was a daily march beginning in the late afternoon and into the evening, through town along the main shopping street, Vitosha Boulevard, to the main square around the Nevski cathedral behind Parliament. These were peaceful marches every day, with rallies into the late evening. Thousands of people participated. At least in Sofia, there was virtually no uniformed police presence. I should clarify that it wasn't peaceful at the very beginning. There were two incidents, one outside Socialist Party headquarters and another outside Parliament, that did involve violence and, in the latter case, very heavy handed intervention by security police to break it up.

The democrats got the process under control, however, and the police did not intervene, and so the demonstrations remained peaceful until the climax. Towards the end of this period, the protests were spreading throughout the country, including along some of the main highways. Roads were closed sporadically and there were some clashes. Downtown Sofia was almost totally closed down by protesters. It was getting to be a very tense situation because it was obvious that there was a lot of political discontent with the horrible mess the Socialists had gotten the country into, and the democratic forces were able to build up this pressure against them.

At this time the head of the Socialist Party was Jan Videnov, who was young but of the old school. There were two other major leaders – one was the Interior Minister - who were also relatively young but, more importantly, were very pragmatic. The situation got to the point where there had to be a decision within the Socialist Party as to how they would finally respond to this tremendous political pressure and the fact that they were losing their parliamentary control. Some of the Socialists in Parliament were falling away and moving to the Social Democratic Party. So the Socialists ultimately had to decide whether they would try to hang on to power at all costs or whether they would step back and allow new parliamentary elections to be called, as demanded by the protesters. The two more pragmatic leaders carried the day, and the Socialists refrained from bringing the situation to a point of violent conflict by trying to break up the demonstrations. At the last minute they stepped down from government, allowed a caretaker government to come into place, and elections were called shortly thereafter.

Of course the Socialists lost the election and the Union of Democratic Forces and other generally pro-democracy parties came back in. It was a tremendously exciting spring, that last spring of 1997. It was like a second democratic revolution in the country to finish the work left undone back in 1989-1990.

When the democratic forces came back into office, they did so with a much clearer reform mandate than they had ever had before. The events of the spring had finally forged a political consensus among Bulgarians that they had to take reform seriously and implement it effectively. They finally accepted that they really had to bite the bullet and proceed with democratic and market reform, even though it would be painful, particularly market reform. They finally made a real break with the past and agreed generally on where the country needed to go, including towards NATO and EU membership. It took all those years to get to that point.

Q: How were relations with Turkey at the time?

HANSEN: There was a set of issues. The Bulgarians had some serious work to do with the Turks on cooperation in law enforcement, especially on the problem of drug trafficking, and we did see some things accomplished in this area.

Regionally, with the Yugoslav sanctions in effect, we were concerned about the impact of the sanctions and of the Yugoslav wars on the trade patterns in the area. One of the issues concerned goods that would normally transit from the Balkans to Western Europe through Yugoslavia via the famous “Brotherhood and Unity” highway across Yugoslavia. That had been a pretty efficient route for the heavy truck traffic from Greece, Turkey, and the Middle East. The Balkan conflict cut off that route. So issues arose concerning alternate routes, managing truck traffic at multiple border crossing points, and so forth. There were serious problems with long backups at the border crossing points.

At this stage, Ambassador Richard Schifter came up with his notion of the Southeast Europe Cooperative Initiative. This is kind of a long story, and I don’t really want to dwell on it, but the idea was that there needed to be uniform ways of handling customs matters and transit of trucks and other traffic across the borders throughout Southeast Europe. This was needed in order to let the goods flow smoothly and to diminish the negative economic impact of the Yugoslav

sanctions from disruptions of normal trade patterns. It was very hard to get this initiative off the ground, in no small part because the U.S. did not have funds to put behind it, though Ambassador Schifter did eventually attract very modest U.S. and other international funding. There were several attempts to get at these issues. The Southeast Europe Cooperative Initiative was one, and it has endured over time. It has now been merged partially with the Stability Pact for South East Europe.

The South Balkan Development Initiative was another attempt to encourage cooperation among, specifically, Albania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia on transportation and communication links. Our main involvement there was through the U.S. Trade and Development Agency (TDA) and the Commerce Department. Again, we didn't have really have serious resources to put against it, other than through TDA feasibility studies. It was largely a matter of trying to get the countries to cooperate among themselves to let traffic flow and build infrastructure to support new transit patterns. If the individual country didn't see a benefit for itself, especially an immediate or short-term benefit, it wasn't going to put a lot of resources into it. So the cooperation was thin and progress minimal. There were a lot of efforts to try to get at this set of issues. It was very hard to do for lack of resources and lack of political will among the countries to cooperate very effectively.

Q: At that point, I wouldn't think the Russians had much to offer for Bulgaria

HANSEN: Well, they didn't, but they kept their footprint there. Theirs was still one of the largest, if not the largest, embassies in town. They had close relations with the former communists on the Bulgarian political scene. The Russian embassy maintained a large, separate cultural center as well.

Q: Can you elaborate a little on the official American presence in Bulgaria?

HANSEN: Let me mention a couple of things about the American presence, just to give a sense of what it was like to work there. It was a really difficult situation in terms of the physical layout. We had this teeny, tiny, ugly embassy building which I'm sure was crowded and cramped and too small even during the communist period when the embassy had a very small staff. By the time we got there the official American presence had blossomed. There were perhaps 100 Americans on the embassy staff, so that tiny building in downtown Serbia housed only a small portion of the embassy staff. The Embassy building held the ambassador's front office, the small Political and Economic Section, the Defense Attaché's office, the Regional Security Officer, and a few others. Everybody else was disbursed in buildings throughout the rest of the city not very close by, not very easy to get to and from. The USIS office was half a dozen blocks away, right in the heart of downtown Sofia. It was a neat location, but hard to get to and vulnerable from a security standpoint. It would take longer to drive there than to get there walking.

USAID was in a separate building at the opposite end of the downtown area in a medium rise building. The Consular Section and most of the Admin staff were somewhere else in a residential neighborhood. I never did find a good way to get there. There was a separate Peace Corps office. The doctor's office and the CLO were elsewhere. We were just all over the place. It was a sizable presence by then and we were totally spread out. It was very hard to hang on to a sense of

an American community. We did have the Marine House, a new house on the outskirts of town, to resort to for TGIFs on Friday evenings and for other events. It became something of a gathering place, as is often the case. Otherwise it was hard to feel a sense of community.

I credit the two ambassadors we had - both Ambassador Montgomery and Ambassador Bohlen – plus the DCM for trying really hard and I think with some success to make an American community of all this, but it was difficult.

The main embassy building, which used to be an apartment building, was absolutely the pits. It was a dump and a fire trap. It was a tall skinny building with an elevator that often didn't work. The facilities were crumbling. State Department visitors told us it was the worst American Embassy they'd ever seen. The only nice thing about my own office was that, having apparently been a separate apartment at one point, had a separate powder room. It was the one and only "executive washroom" I ever had in the Foreign Service. Even the Ambassador's office in Sofia didn't have an executive washroom, so I was lucky on that score. A brand new American Embassy has just been opened in Sofia. I've seen the drawings and pictures, and it looks really lovely.

Q: What about relations with Romania?

HANSEN: I mentioned earlier that there a sort of running competition between Bulgaria and Romania as to which was doing better on reforms and which had better relations with the United States. During the time that I was in Bulgaria, Romania was definitely ahead of the curve. The Romanians had their reforms better underway, although it was such a long haul in Romania and they had such a long way to go. Their relations with the United States were better at that time. Things were looking pretty good for Romania. The Bulgarians had a hard time understanding why the United States looked favorably on Romania at that stage. I expect it was the other way around whenever Bulgaria happened to be ahead of the curve. Their relationship was not particularly close or warm.

One of the abiding issues, and it may still be an issue, was the location for a second bridge across the Danube. There is only the one bridge across the Danube River between Bulgaria and Romania, at Ruse on the Bulgarian side. There was a running debate as to whether there was enough truck traffic and economic activity to justify a second bridge and if so, where it should be located and how it could be financed. There were political aspects to this issue on both sides of the border. Romania's then-President Iliescu was thought to favor a location closer to his home territory of Iasi, Romania. Bulgaria wanted the bridge at the other end of the river border in Northwestern Bulgaria.

Another bilateral issue between them had to do with the Bulgarian nuclear power plant, Kozloduy. The European Union had long since told Bulgaria that it had to close down portions of that plant and upgrade others. If there were a nuclear incident at that plant, the prevailing winds would carry any polluted air into Romanian territory. To counter that issue, the Bulgarians claimed concern about pollution from a Romanian chemical plant. These issues came into play from time to time.

Q: Was there the feeling among the Foreign Service people, comparing Bulgaria's experience to that of Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, that Bulgaria was at the lower end of the totem pole?

HANSEN: Perhaps somewhat. Certainly we understood fully why Bulgaria suffered by comparison to those other countries in terms of the reform experience and the relationship with the United States. We all knew that Bulgaria faced a much tougher situation, started out from a lower starting point, and did not have the kind of historical relationship with the United States that some of the other countries did. Everyone understood the sort of the special political claim that Poland, for example, had on America's good graces and why Poland received far more U.S. assistance than Bulgaria ever did. I think people sometimes felt that we were laboring in the field and doing our best but finding it a discouraging situation.

That's why, towards the end of my tour, it was so exciting in those last six months to see the turnaround that occurred and to see the possibilities that Bulgaria could now take off on a reform trajectory. And they did just that. It's still been a long slow process, but they did take off. They turned that corner and headed in the right direction.

Q: What about the universities? Were they a source of intellectual and political ferment?

HANSEN: Not ferment, I wouldn't say. Bulgarians are a very highly and well educated people. They are very education-oriented and intelligent, very hardworking academically. Larry will tell you more about this, but, in terms of a place for political dissent and so forth, there were some student groups and there were some students active in the political parties. But I wouldn't describe the universities as a separate nucleus of political activism as such. I'm sure Larry will talk to you about the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). After 1989, there was an American university set up in the town of Blagoevgrad in Southern Bulgaria, funded primarily by George Soros and the U.S. Government..

Q: Does this go back to Roberts College? What about the American College of Sofia?

HANSEN: Not AUBG; it's a separate, new university.

The Roberts College organization did have a school in Bulgaria, the American College of Sofia, a high school, and this brings us to a situation involving our family.

Prior to World War II, there had been in Bulgaria an American high school on the outskirts of Sofia, run by the same foundation that founded Roberts College in Turkey. The school was closed during World War II. The school property was taken over by the communists after the war and used by the Bulgarian Interior Ministry. When the communist system fell, the foundation asked for the return of its property. Under the early UDF government, a portion of the property was returned and the school gradually re-opened. The Interior Ministry still held onto part of the property. Its guards controlled access to the area including the campus, which was often problematic in that visiting parents or embassy staff were denied admittance on a fairly regular basis, especially early on. The ministry also had a firing range on the property.

In any event, on a competitive basis, the school admitted a first class of Bulgarian students and year by year added classes to establish a full high school. So this was the American College of Sofia. It essentially became part of the long Bulgarian tradition of foreign-language high schools, in which students complete their high school studies in the specified language. It used a Bulgarian curriculum, which is quite different from the typical American high school curriculum. There were other English-language high schools in Bulgaria, plus high schools taught in French, German, Italian, Russian; the ethnic Turks were advocating for re-establishment of a Turkish-language high school, and that may have happened by now. It's an excellent system that produced excellent results, as we could see by the many Bulgarians we met who were so fluent in foreign languages. Under the communist system, I understood, admittance to these elite schools was often reserved for the elites. The American College in Sofia was quite different in that competitive exams were used. This meant that its student body came from among the very best students in the country.

By the time we got to Sofia, the school had been back in operation for several years, and we anticipated that our kids would attend. Our older daughter, as a sophomore, joined that first class moving through the high school. It turned out to be a poor match, both academically and socially. At that point, the school wasn't really prepared to teach fully in English. The math book was in Bulgarian, for example. There were a few American teachers on the staff, but the Bulgarian teachers often lapsed into Bulgarian. The students were at times quite antagonistic towards the few international students on campus. It was a very uncomfortable environment.

To make a long story short, our daughter transferred to a boarding school outside London halfway through the sophomore year. That mid-year transfer was a difficult one, and I'm sure her sophomore year was pretty miserable all the way around. But the new school worked out wonderfully for her, so in the longer run, the situation worked out. She got into the drama program from the outset, was active in it all the way through, and went on to Northwestern University and a very successful career in stage management in Chicago. She had opportunities to get into London often and got to know that fantastic city. As they say, sending a child to boarding school is often as hard or harder on the parents than it is on the child, and I think that may have been the case here. It was a very hard decision to make. We were just thrilled, though, to see how she thrived in the new environment, especially in the junior and senior years.

Our younger daughter attended the Anglo-American School for eighth grade. It had a split campus at the time. The upper grades were located in a building on the campus of the American College of Sofia cum Interior Ministry. It was a situation somewhat similar to what our daughter remembered from Belgrade, so she was quite comfortable there. When it came time to move on to the American College, several of her classmates made the move as well, so she had a good group of cohorts to make the transition. By then, the atmosphere at the college was a little better. Given the academic demands of the school, we lined up a tutor for our daughter who helped her cope with the math and science courses. She ended up doing very well, and was very active in the school's extra-curricular drama program. With her group of friends, primarily from among the international community, she became quite comfortable in Sofia. The kids would hang out downtown on the week-ends, she developed some close friends among the American Embassy staff, and she began to take a real interest in her surroundings. It was a good Foreign Service experience.

Q: Did you get any high level visits?

HANSEN: Only a few, and none from the State Department. This was a reflection of where Bulgaria stood in terms of U.S. interests and how we judged Bulgaria's progress, or lack thereof, on serious reform. The one exception was a 24-hour visit by Richard Holbrooke, then the special envoy for Yugoslavia. Since he was the highest-ranking State Department visitor, he was treated practically as a head of state, including a dinner hosted in his honor by President Zhelev.

During our last year in Bulgaria, the Defense Department was taking more of an interest in the country. At around the end of 1996 or early 1997, we had an excellent visit by Undersecretary of Defense Walt Slocum. I mentioned earlier a pro-democracy leader by the name of Solomon Passi, who was a strong, enthusiastic, and steady advocate for Bulgarian membership in NATO. He had founded an organization, the Atlantic Club, to build public support for that goal. Undersecretary Slocum came and spoke to a public session of the Atlantic Club, at the Sheraton Hotel. The room was packed, SRO. His reception was very warm. Slocum seemed thrilled by all of this, saying that he'd never had such a reception in all his travels around the region. I think he may have paid a second visit later on. Partly thanks to the success of his visit, or visits, Secretary of Defense Cohen came in July 1997, right at the end of my own tour.

This was another great success, thank goodness. It was wonderful to participate in it. By this time Bulgaria had gone through that second revolution, if you will. The Socialists had stepped aside and the democrats had come back in with a parliamentary majority and a real mandate to move the country in a pro-reform way, including towards NATO membership.

As a sidelight in terms of the logistics of the visit, Cohen was traveling in the region and was in Kiev just beforehand. Apparently the program in Kiev had not gone well and he got bored. On a Friday evening, the embassy in Kiev called me up – I was the Acting DCM at the time – to say that Cohen wanted to come to Sofia a day early, on Saturday evening, actually about 12 hours ahead of schedule. So at the very last second, we had to move up the arrival ceremonies and juggle some of the arrangements for his meetings and events on the Sunday and also on Monday morning. Everyone in the embassy and on the Bulgarian side pulled together beautifully, and it all came off without a hitch. The success of the visit apparently gave the Secretary a very positive picture of Bulgaria, and he promised to return a few months later for a regional defense ministers meeting. I think the Bulgarians were floored that he would be so spontaneously receptive to that second invitation. The visit was a huge success.

Speaking personally, it was a real treat for me and a perfect way to wind up my tour on that very nice high note.

Q: In the summer of 1997, where did you go next?

HANSEN: Before we move on, I would just like to register my admiration for the two ambassadors we worked for in Sofia, Ambassador Montgomery and Ambassador Bohlen. They both did great things for Bulgaria and for the U.S.-Bulgarian relationship, often under very trying, frustrating circumstances. It was an honor to work with them.

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