

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

**KARL SOMMERLATTE**

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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. Sommerlatte]

*Q: The first topic we will want Karl to talk to us about is his first Foreign Service assignment.*

SOMMERLATTE: My first posting was to Singapore. Ron had been asking me while you were adjusting the tape, why I went to Singapore, and I suspect because there was a vacancy. I hadn't applied for it. I had no background in the Far East, though of course, I had served there during the war, but that has very little relevance. In any event I was sent by the travel department. We were usually supposed to be able to travel first class, but the travel department was in the business of saving money, and they weren't worried about salaries, so they put me on a freighter, a Dutch freighter, the Kota Agoeng. At that time, we didn't have to travel on American ships. By the time I returned, we did. It took two months to get out there. My salary wasn't considered very important, and it wasn't very big at that time. I recall making \$3600 a year, \$300 a month. Because you were in the Foreign Service and not in the Civil Service, we didn't get a pay raise enacted by Congress. We did get it retroactively when they realized we were all government employees. The Foreign Service was a service apart from the Civil Service, so when the legislation went through in '49, we didn't get the pay raise. So these two months they saved money on the airfare that had been charged by then. I went through the Suez Canal and stopped finally at Port Swettenham where I left the ship to travel to the consul at Kuala Lumpur. I spoke there with Bill Blue about the insurgency in Malaya that was going on at the time. At that time it was Malaya and the colony of Singapore, the Federation of Malaya. After speaking with him and having lunch with him, I took the train to Singapore overnight, and met my wife and son and the ship in Singapore the next day in March of '49. I served under William Langdon, the consul general and a career FSO, who had been a language officer in Japan prior to the war. He expressed an interesting view at one point while I was there, and not a popular view, that internment of the Japanese on the west coast would come back to haunt us. He felt it was unjust and uncalled for. I am not sure that I share his views on that to this day. I am not sure what would have happened had the Japanese landed on the west coast. Allegedly even J. Edgar Hoover was not concerned about Japanese Americans or whether he thought the Japanese weren't going to land, I don't know. In any event, Langdon had that view, and I think it was interesting because I do recall it.

My initial position there was in charge of the consular section, passport, visa, shipping. I started to do voluntary reporting there, stuff that the consular officers usually didn't do. My first Foreign Service report was the Asian seamen's union Singapore, which attracted some attention in the Department among others - the Labor Department which had never heard much about the Asian seaman's union and had no information on it. That was sort of the level of our intelligence and information in 1949 about developments in the Far East or Southeast Asia. I then moved on to reporting on the communist insurgency which was widely confined to what was known as the Federation of Malaya. That was in the hinterlands across the Strait of Johore. I worked perhaps too closely with the CIA station chief in Singapore who had been a neighbor in the very nice government quarters. Our careers sort of followed. He was in Bangkok when I was at Chiang Mai. He briefed me on many developments there. I associated with the Shaw brothers. They had the improbable names Run-run and Runme Shaw. They were movie makers. They had apparently accommodated during the Japanese occupation. They didn't get thrown into jail in any event. But the British didn't do anything. Run-run Shaw wanted his daughters to go to an American college, Smith or Wellesley or so on. I advised him on it, got them into a prep school. Run-run remained really sort of a lifelong friend. He finally ended up in Hong Kong and became Sir Run-run Shaw. I think he is still there. I talked to his son-in-law, who strangely enough was with Morgan Stanley where I am now working in the India-Atlantic Office. His son-in-law was in Hawaii working for the same firm. He informed me that Sir Run-run was still not active but retired, I think, in some sort of community, I don't know. But he was an extremely wealthy man, a multimillionaire, and had been generous to charities, and in fact entertained lavishly not only a client of mine but my sister when they visited Hong Kong. Sent a Rolls Royce for them and so on. Unfortunately, I never got back, never was anxious to return after I had left the area.

I then became convinced I could not begin to understand communism without learning something about the Soviet Union, the Russians. I think I mentioned earlier that I had read the Affairs of X which had been published in the "Foreign Affairs" quarterly. I thought that this was a necessity to have any comprehension of the movement. At that time we did not focus or were not focusing on the differences between Chinese communism and Russian communism because there were no apparent differences known. I then was moved from the consular section to a political reporting job for the balance of my tour in Singapore. So when the Chinese language officer...

*Q: You got to Singapore in what year?*

SOMMERLATTE: In March of '49.

*Q: And you left in what year?*

SOMMERLATTE: In '51.

*Q: In '51. Now, I am a little bit weak, but had Communist China become Communist China and Taiwan become free China by that point?*

SOMMERLATTE: No, they were still battling. The Kuomintang was still in charge of the bulk of China, but the battle was going on. We assumed that the Communist Chinese were part and parcel with the Soviets.

*Q: I think that was the general view.*

SOMMERLATTE: And there was no knowledge of that, though the evacuation did not occur until, I believe, '52 or '53. They gave up the mainland. But the Chinese language officer, Oscar Armstrong, had been assigned to the consulate general. Langdon placed Armstrong in charge of the consular section, which didn't particularly thrill him. He thought he was sent there to do reporting, but Langdon observed my reporting and thought I should be the reporting officer and Armstrong should start as the consular officer. (That decision came back to haunt me when I once had an opportunity to go to Hawaii as deputy political advisor to CINCPAC. Oscar Armstrong was the political advisor, and he vetoed my assignment. He said I had no time for learning there. You had to be familiar with Pacific affairs and China and so on, which was all right. It worked out nicely.) So in January of 1951 I returned to the Foreign Service Institute for intensive language training. We didn't even start to read the language for the first two or three months. We were just in a room with a native speaker of Russian repeating phrases of Russian. Phrase repetition is the mother of learning. That was the approach to spoken Russian. Then we went to Dartmouth for a summer of both spoken language and written language. That was followed in September of '51 by a Russian language and area course at Columbia University, where I got my masters degree.

*Q: At that time?*

SOMMERLATTE: At that time.

*Q: Oh, very good.*

SOMMERLATTE: I finished it while I was there. The Department wasn't particularly anxious for us to take a degree. They were fearful you would get a degree and go out and teach and not stay in the Foreign Service. They couldn't very well prevent it if you met the requirements. You had to do a paper anyway for the Foreign Service requirement, and I did a paper that met both requirements. And I took the courses which were all required.

Then I returned in June of '52 to Washington. There wasn't any vacancy right then in the Soviet field, to the Russian or Soviet desk in the Department of State. While I was there, a person thought I might go to Poland because the Moscow embassy was extremely small. There were almost no open slots even for a Russian language officer. Then a vacancy opened up as a general services officer. We didn't have to be a Russian language officer, but the Department looked at my background at Annapolis and training there, and thought that might qualify me to fulfill a functional assignment. We were about to move to a new embassy, and thought that I might well qualify for this job.

*Q: Now this is Poland or...*

SOMMERLATTE: No, this is Moscow. They opened up the job in Moscow, the general services officer. It was not a Russian language officer's job. Russia, on the Soviet desk, on the assignment desk, they thought that was my academy background and training. I didn't report to that job. I had the least mechanical aptitude of anybody who graduated from Annapolis up to that time. Anyway, I was sent there as a general services officer. I got there shortly before Stalin's death, March of 1951. I remember the exhilarating experience of the book that was written there, A Window on Red Square. Embassy Mokhovaya was on that square. We had been given that location right after the halcyon days of '33. Stalin at that time would accommodate us. Then Stalin got tired looking out and seeing American flags flying all over the chancery building, and ordered us to move. So that was part of the package: that even while Stalin was living, we were supposed to be moving out of the embassy. We didn't get moved out before he died. As I got there, when I arrived, it was only a couple of weeks later that he died. We maintained a room on the other side of Red Square at the Hotel Metropole. We did that because space was so short; if anybody came in you had to have a place to stay. There wasn't any place in the chancery. The ambassador's residence wasn't a spot where they wanted to put everybody up. So I went over to this vacant hotel room that we paid for. I was then able to cross Red Square to the embassy because they said I have arrived because I have a diplomatic passport. They stopped me two or three times. Moscow is laid out in a ring of concentric circles. This inner circle around the Kremlin is completely blocked off. Some mourners were permitted to view Stalin's body. They were permitted to come in under carefully regulated police guidance. In one of my trips I was able to see just by happenstance, the members of the Politburo who were lined up to view Stalin's remains. The lineup, of course, was everything. They had an analogy at the time. This was, we didn't have spies all the time; we didn't have humint, human intelligence, available at that time, so this was the first indication we had of the order that might occur. It had not been announced. It was Malenkov, Beria, Khrushchev, Bulganin, and I have forgotten the others. So I recognized the faces. Obviously they weren't painted or had their name tags on. I went back and reported that. That I think, was the first report we had of the succession. It developed that Malenkov was indeed the first prime minister.

*Q: Let me ask you a quick question while we are at this point. What was the general attitude between the embassy about Stalin's death? Was it exhilaration (everybody was happy), or were they nervous, or was there anxiety about what the future was going to be? Then a second part of the question would be from your perspective, Russia generally. The people in Russia, maybe the apparatchiks, how did they react to Stalin? Were they happy or were they nervous?*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, we clearly were wondering. I think our feeling was it could always get worse. We don't know. I mean, after all, the balloon could go up. But I think there was generally some pleasure that he was gone. It seemed unlikely it would get worse. So as far as the people were concerned, again we [were respectful] but we

certainly weren't mourning. I remember, you know, shortly before he died, there was a doctor's plot. Doctors were largely Jewish in the Kremlin, and so this anti-Semitic trend was going on. There had been a doctor's plot allegedly to eliminate senior communist officials. That sort of thing dissipated after Stalin's death except for, I remember, a Soviet page saying those doctors, those doctors, as though they were responsible for Stalin's death.

Well, no Soviet citizen would express to a foreigner at that time anything really about anything, unless they had a few drinks, and you didn't have a chance to have drinks with them, did you? Contact was just ahead of itself. You met somebody on the street, you know, the face was dumb. The Russians aren't a very expressive people anyway. I like them very much but the reaction was mourning. It had to be.

*Q: They were surprised. As I recall my reaction, at that point I was not terribly involved with foreign affairs or anything, but generally I remember there seemed to be a great preoccupation with the communist threat. Perhaps the communists are going to over run the country. There might be a third world war with Russia. A lot of that centered on Stalin being a really bad guy. Here there seemed to be two things. One, there seemed to be surprise that he died. He was not terribly old, and he didn't look to be in bad health, or at least that was the perception I had. Secondly, I would say there was a feeling that, like you said, although things had gotten worse, perhaps things would warm up now because a lot of the bad tension had been vested in Stalin from my perspective as a teenager at that time.*

SOMMERLATTE: That is true. I think that was our perception that probably it isn't going to get any worse. Now, but Stalin was cautious, as we know he was always extremely cautious. He knew we had the bomb. He knew we had more of them. He wasn't going to do anything in retrospect really except push as far as he could. He certainly wasn't going to give up east Germany. We accepted that line. We weren't happy about it. Remember the Berlin blockade which we broke with the airlift, and they finally dropped the blockade and let us pass. So we were restrained, too, in our approach. We didn't want war. But we didn't know it was a chess game. So I think we were cautious. We were probably hopeful that it would improve, and we knew nothing really about Malenkov except that he was a functionary, and didn't appear to be particularly fit, and Beria was very conservative. Beria was head of the secret police.

*Q: It is generally thought that Stalin was in poor health and may die. In the United States I don't think that was the view of things.*

SOMMERLATTE: I don't think we had any great smokers, you know, these pock marks and on. I must confess I don't remember his age, but he was in his 70s.

*Q: Oh, he was that old at the time?*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes.

*Q: Okay, I thought he was younger than that. Maybe it wasn't as big a surprise.*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, you know, we had no report on his health, so we had no way of knowing. I don't think we were terribly astounded or anything. I don't recall any great astonishment. We didn't think the doctors had poisoned him. As I recall, he was a pretty heavy smoker. I don't think there was any particular surprise except he died obviously out of the blue. We had nothing against Stalin that was considered terribly unusual. Our interests, of course, was in the succession. Malenkov appeared to us as a functionary, and as I recall, we didn't feel him a threatening personage because he. Beria was the man we were concerned about. Following this, Khrushchev and Malenkov teamed up to get rid of Beria. He was shot, an enemy of the state and so on. They polished him off. That, of course, was a favorable sign because he was a Georgian like Stalin, and head of the secret police. Not that the secret police disappeared, but he was the most threatening character in the Soviet Union in our years. Now what happened there? Well, after that, of course, Khrushchev teamed up with others and got rid of Malenkov. He didn't have such a disastrous end. He just went off to a job in Siberia. I have forgotten the province. That was the sort of functionary he was. He was a non-threatening functionary, so Khrushchev just wanted him out of the way so he could take over, and indeed he subsequently did. So what did they do after we moved from Macaba? Well, first of all, actually the Russians did offer us a chance to stay after Stalin's death in Mokhovaya. Well, we said, "You have to go." We had invested so much in the new embassy and we needed more space, so we gave up this delightful place, the one that we had. Mokhovaya was just a wonderful location, that's all.

*Q: As far as moving to a new location or even the old location, were you concerned about wiretaps and bugs and that sort of thing? How did you deal with that?*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, not very effectively. Dick Davies, a former ambassador, and who had served in Moscow twice, and a Russian language specialist, wrote an article "Moving From Mokhovaya Street," that I believe appeared in the "Foreign Affairs" journal. He told the story about how we had to have a Russian language officer on every truck that went over to make sure they didn't bug anything. Of course they did, because we couldn't be there all the time. They didn't bug it on the truck. We didn't have 24 hour surveillance over there as we moved in. In any event, that article at the end reports the final party we had for the Russian workmen. We decided we were going to invite them to a party because of their participation in the move. No contact with any Russians at all. Nobody could go to a Russian home, so this was an opportunity. We bought plenty of vodka and some wine. I don't think we had any caviar, just some globs of cheese or something. After hesitation, discussion and so on, they agreed that they would come. This, of course, turned into a drunken brawl. Most of them couldn't make it home, so I packed up the group and put them in a van and took them to the sobering up station. The sobering up station is a peculiar Moscow institution because the police have great power. They had to; it was the only relaxation they had. So they let them go there and vomit and do whatever they had to. They had quite a mess down there and cleaned up after it.

Sobering up stations were all over Moscow. In addition, I don't know where I got the money this time, but I paid their fines. They couldn't get over that. I have no idea whether they suffered anything, but I doubt that they had only limited contacts. I don't imagine they got a hassle. They would understand it was the vodka that makes the problem.

*Q: Did you get any good information?*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, no, just they just blew up friendships and...

*Q: It was just a social thing. There was no intelligence gathering.*

SOMMERLATTE: They had no information anyway. They were just movers. They wouldn't tell us about it. They probably didn't do as much as a bugging because we were right there. They were just doing the heavy lifting. They had many more sophisticated devices.

*Q: How did you deal with bugs? Suppose you had something that you absolutely had to keep confidential. What did you do?*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, well, that was the best. No, not in the car. You would walk. But we had two upper rooms that were supposedly strictly foolproof. And then in the upper room, the upper two floors, we had the inner sanctum. That was a room within a room. It was glass. You couldn't see any wires. We thought that they couldn't penetrate that. Whether they could or couldn't, I don't know. But that was installed in Tchaikovsky. That is the second building we had. I was able, I believe, to get the first driver's license that an embassy officer received after World War II.

*Q: You were still the general services officer at this point.*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes, I think I was still the general services officer. I don't believe I drove the Russian workmen to the sobering up station because I had a few drinks myself. We had embassy chauffeurs who drove a van. I was able to get them in, but not much more and then count the money out. So I did persist in the driver's license. Oh, they had two or three examiners, and they asked all sorts of questions. Officers just weren't taking it. They thought it was impossible to pass. So when I finally received the license, the Russian examiners said, "Well, you didn't do very well, but we will give you a license."

*Q: Was it only a written exam or did you have to...*

SOMMERLATTE: No, oral.

*Q: An oral exam! Did you have to go out and drive for someone?*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, no, it was an oral exam on their rules of the road. They knew I could drive very well. It was a cross examination on what their rules were, where did we

say to turn, which lane and so on, every detail of the rules that they insisted that you answer correctly. I studied for it. You know, it is very technical.

*Q: By that time you understood Russian fears very well.*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, I understood the nuts, but my method was political. If you asked me about chrysanthemums, oleanders, of course, there aren't too many. I know the words for flowers, but those get into many flowers. So the cultural Russian, no, but political, and you know, really Pravda was again political, the same stuff all over again. That is what we were reading, and we had everyday conversations on it. The cultural conversation about the arts and so on, no. I was nowhere near bilingual. I was at the middle level. I don't think at the Bohlen level either. I couldn't judge, because I never heard Ambassador Bohlen speak much Russian. He spoke English. I didn't listen to him very often. I think he spoke better Russian than I. He spoke that much longer. But it was working nonetheless. So then shortly after we moved to the new embassy. I was moved up to the political reporting slot. Clearly they could find a better general services officer than I. I forgot who came in. But I did move there, and I worked under David Enders, who was chief or deputy chief of the political section. Another Russian language officer, of course. He was the last person out of Vladivostok at the end of the war. He served in Moscow during the war. Then they closed the consulate general at Vladivostok at the end of the war. Dave came back and was then, I believe, at the embassy. Dave was a meticulous craftsman and his language was very precise. You wrote very carefully for him. If you didn't, he fired you. And it became a strict thing, very strict. I kept in touch with Dave and have seen him from time to time. He lives down in Fort Pierce. Then the Foreign Service inspector came and I think it was helpful to my career. He characterized me as probably the most productive officer in the embassy because of the reporting work I was doing and the activity. I took the first trip to Siberia since WWII, I believe.

*Q: Wow, that has got to be several hours on a train.*

SOMMERLATTE: On a train, oh, yes, hours and hours. Two days. We went to a place called Kurdansk. I went with the agricultural attaché... I don't think there is any problem revealing these things, it was so long ago. He was the station chief for the CIA in Moscow. I probably associated more than was wise and good for my career with agency people, but again that was part of my background. They had specific objectives; they knew what they wanted, and where I could provide information, I was happy to do so.

*Q: Why would it be bad for your career to say be social with the CIA?*

SOMMERLATTE: The Department and the CIA aren't all that cozy.

*Q: Was it a rivalry sort of thing?*

SOMMERLATTE: Kind of like CIA and FBI. The CIA can upset the apple cart. You know, they have their people in cover positions, and they get caught in an activity, they



will be declared persona non grata. So the Department isn't thrilled. They don't feel that intelligence is too much part of their work. Their work is with the foreign ministry. And in many cases it is. But that is the traditional attitude. But in any event, I took this trip to Kordan. With our level of intelligence what did we do? We counted boxcars to see how many trains were coming which way. We'd count the number of trains and then the boxcars to see what traffic was doing. You know, we didn't have spy satellites. We didn't have agents out there. That was the level of our intelligence. That was what the agency wanted from their reporting officers.

*Q: What time of the year did you take the trip?*

SOMMERLATTE: It was the springtime. It wasn't too cold then.

*Q: Could you make a judgment about the land? Did it look productive? Were the farms in good shape? Or could you make that kind of judgment?*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, no. The agricultural attaché was because he had come from a farm in Louisiana and he was able to make that judgment. We pretty well know they weren't productive. We knew what was happening and we could see the end results of that from what you couldn't buy in the stores. The only real halfway decent food that was available was from the farmers marketplace, where they were allowed to have a little plot. The farmers could cultivate something on the side.

*Q: Oh, I thought that was just the last months of perestroika where they did this. This is all the way back.*

SOMMERLATTE: All the way back. That was the only way you could get anything. If you wanted a chunk of meat, that is where you went. If there was meat, flies would be all over it. If you wanted tomatoes or cucumbers in wintertime, that is where you went. You didn't go to a Soviet grocery store. So, that was our activity, traveling out there, counting boxcars on the way out. If we had a chance to talk to somebody, we would be happy to do so if they were in the compartment and if they would talk. I think on one trip at least, there was a Russian colonel. He wasn't going to reveal any secrets but it was a little mind game. You talk to him and learn a little bit but only what he wanted you to learn. People were very restrained in general. Vodka was the great lubricant. If they didn't want to drink with you, you didn't get any action. If you want to count boxcars, of course, we had our notes, so we didn't particularly want to have people around. I think we would opt for the people if they were in the compartment, if the people would talk, rather than the boxcars, as I recall. At least I was more interested in the people than in the boxcars. But that gives an idea of the level of intelligence, what we thought about intelligence.

*Q: Your view would be that the CIA didn't have any or many covert spies running around.*

SOMMERLATTE: They didn't have any.

The next trip I took was to the Republic of Moldavia, which is now the Republic of Moldova. It really was a part of Romania, but the Russians grabbed it after World War II. I went with Coby Swank, who was the last ambassador to Cambodia before Pol Pot took over. We again went around counting boxcars and drawing street maps, as we did in Kirganz because they had no maps. We again bought books in the local bookstore because they might not be available in Moscow. And bookstores were mainly political.

*Q: This is an oral history focusing on Karl Sommerlatte's career in the Foreign Service. Today is August 10, 2002. After a bit of a hiatus we are ready to start recording today. Our plan will be to pick up the recording exactly where we left it off. When we last ended, Karl had told us about his first assignment in Moscow. Part of that assignment involved a trip to Siberia where he tried to get as much intelligence as he could, although it was somewhat limited, involving such things as counting boxcars and so forth. But I think we are going to skip right back into the middle of that. He is still in Moscow, but now I think he is going to tell us about some other activities he was involved in at that time. So with that as an introduction, I will turn it over to Karl.*

SOMMERLATTE: All right, thank you, Ron, for the introduction. May I sort of go over again the reason I actually took the trip? We did not have any so-called humint. This is before the day of the U-2. So counting boxcars was our way of finding out anything we could. What was the traffic, and at a given time of day on a given route? As limited as that was, it was better than nothing. This, of course, was in '52 to '54 that I was in Moscow. That was just prior to and following Stalin's death as I mentioned.

All right, picking up with Moldavia. This was the first trip to Moldavia by anyone in the embassy since World War II. This is a segment of Romania that was seized from Romania by the Soviet Union after WWII. We were not able to resist. It became one of the constituent republics, the so-called constituents as they were, all subservient to Moscow. It is now called the Republic of Moldova. But those who are much more familiar with the situation now than I would be able to tell you why the Moldovans chose to remain separate from Romania rather than not reunite with Romania. They no doubt have slight linguistic differences, and they no doubt developed those differences. But this is not my experience, so I shouldn't be talking much about that. This trip was made with Coby Swank, who later became the last ambassador to Cambodia before Pol Pot. The trip proceeded almost along identical lines with the trip to Siberia. We would count boxcars from the train, preferably hide the notes. Then when we got into town, we would try to map the streets of the capital, purchase books that weren't available in Moscow, books of local interest, and since neither of us read Romanian, we didn't know anything about the local language, we couldn't tell what to pick up in Moldavian or the Romanian language. But there were also Russian books.

We were able to get an interview with one official who was, of course, Russian. He greeted us in Russian. I have forgotten his name. We sought an interview, and he gave it to us. It was not very informative. After that, both of us returned to Embassy Moscow and

continued the reporting job.

Later on in the tour, I went out to Berlin. I took my wife out for medical treatment and then returned from East Berlin to Moscow. The trip from Warsaw to Moscow was of particular interest to us at the time. Bear in mind again that there was very limited intelligence available to us. We did know that the Russians had narrow gauge rails and that they were narrower than most used in Western Europe. We were quite interested in how they changed these. Well, it was a primitive method of changing. I got to the border, and I saw them place the cars up and change the wheels. Of course they had to change the engine because they had a narrow gauge engine. They didn't unload the cars or anything; they just had wheels that were interchangeable with the narrow gauge and wide gauge. I took a taxi to the frontier to determine this information. Then I was detained by the frontier guards. They were going to hold me and did for some time. I protested. It came that I had diplomatic immunity. After some vigorous exchanges, they released me. Of course, I had only got back to Moscow a day fully reporting the incident to the embassy, and we got a protest from the foreign office. What was I doing in that restricted area? Why, even Soviet citizens aren't permitted in this secure area, this restricted area, and here you are, a member of your embassy staff went there. Counselor Elim O'Shaughnessy was a very quick witted Irishman. When he was told that, he said, "Well, if that was a restricted zone, why didn't you arrest the taxi driver?" There wasn't any particular counter to that. But it didn't endear me to the Russians. So should I turn over to you for further queries or just continue?

*Q: I think we are talking about your assignment in Russia, and why don't you just let it run? Go ahead and have an open story about it.*

SOMMERLATTE: All right. I continued to push the envelope further in trips around town. I think I mentioned earlier, I don't want to go on about that, I did a great deal of reporting, but again on a primitive scale. You didn't have a chance to go into Soviet homes or anything. And I would drive when I could, because I had the drivers license. I think this pushing of the envelope probably led to my former wife's entrapment. That was reported in the Colliers article, "My Last Walk in Moscow" which was published shortly after we returned. Betty, my then wife, took a walk with Billie Stint, the wife of the Marine Corps attaché in Moscow. And Billie had a camera. Betty did not have a camera. They were strolling down an area close to the embassy, and saw a little Russian child. Billie decided she would take a picture of him. Now cameras were principal. We knew Russians didn't like cameras, but photographing a child didn't seem to be... an attractive child. Russian children are... when they are all bundled up, didn't seem to be out of bounds. So she snapped the picture. Immediately the KGB men who were tailing Billie and Betty came out of nowhere, and herded them into an enclosed hall, and just kept them there. Billie insisted on making one call, and said, "You have got to allow us one call." They did. She called the embassy whereupon I grabbed an embassy driver. She said they were held in a hall near the embassy.

*Q: How long were they in custody before they could make the phone call? Do you know?*

SOMMERLATTE: Probably 15 minutes.

*Q: Oh, okay.*

SOMMERLATTE: Then I grabbed a car. In this case I wanted a chauffeur with me and then drove around. What is a hall near the embassy? That took about another I would guess about an hour, until I finally found them. By that time they had been permitted to come outside. They were standing there, and of course, I secured their release, and we drove back to the embassy. Following that, I think it was the next day, the foreign office had sent a note. By this time, Ambassador Bohlen had arrived, a very capable and excellent ambassador, one of the triumvirate of the Russian specialists, Kennan, Bohlen, and Franny Stevens, who didn't go on to great things because of personal problems. But they were the first three. Kennan was the ambassador. He is still living, went to Princeton. I am digressing here now to Kennan because I neglected to mention that earlier. But Bohlen had been confirmed, after some controversy, by the Senate because Eisenhower wanted a man that he considered competent and capable in Moscow. He was sort of [unwelcome] in Russia, the McCarthy era was still on, but Eisenhower pulled all the stops and he was confirmed. So Bohlen had arrived, and prior to my wife being declared persona non grata. He protested to the foreign minister. "Nothing has been done wrong here. It is ridiculous. You have told me it was only an effort to photograph a Russian child," but the allegations were that they were trying to photograph the trash in the background. Well, of course, there was trash everywhere in Moscow. But then he made the point that Mrs. Sommerlatte didn't even have a camera. It was the other lady. The Russians didn't really care if they were both blond and slim. They were just not going to admit error even on that point. Not that Bohlen wanted to pit one against the other, but to set the record straight factually. Facts didn't matter to the Soviet Union that day. This was the immediate post Stalin period, still under Malenkov. So with that, my wife then left. Of course I followed her out. It was near the end of my tour, and that ended Moscow.

*Q: Yes. Now, did you go with her?*

SOMMERLATTE: With her.

*Q: Okay, so they let you leave a little bit before the end of your first tour there. Just generally from that point of view. Did some incident like that either help or hurt a person's Foreign Service career? I can imagine it could go either way in something like that.*

SOMMERLATTE: It is interesting. It didn't particularly hurt the career with Soviet specialists. They know the Soviet Union. They know that they were all powerful in their land. They probably thought, they knew I was a little aggressive, number one, got a drivers license number two, and active travel, number three probably with the association with some of the CIA personnel, one or two of them at certain times. So, yes, I don't believe it had a major effect. It meant at that time, it was unlikely I could be assigned to

the Soviet Union. So my Russian language training appeared wasted, but it didn't mean I couldn't be assigned to eastern Europe at a site later on. In fact it did play a role in a future assignment. I will touch on that as we come along, the assignment to Prague.

*Q: But I presume that because it was at the end of your tour of duty in Moscow, thought somewhere had been given to what your next assignment would have been, and so you weren't kind of stranded for a bit I think or yes. Tell us about your next assignment.*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, in fact, I am not sure how much thought had been given. The Department wasn't then noted for forward planning. I don't know, I was still three months from the end of my time. Certainly at that time, planning ahead was not a feature of the Foreign Service that I knew. When the time came, or a few weeks before, oh, you had home leave and that gave them a few weeks or a month to think about it and see what they could develop. So I don't think, as the next assignment suggests, the next assignment was not part of forward planning because of this. So should I go on?

*Q: Please. I guess the next assignment, the thread would be communism, but beyond that it is a kind of a different part of the world, so go ahead and tell us about...*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes, the thread you see... We got back in '54, the very end of '54, had Christmas at home, and then my son was in school in England at the time because there wasn't much schooling in Moscow. There was some, but we knew there would be another assignment, so he was in school in England. We stopped by and spent Christmas in the States, of course. Then on returning to the States, I learned that Kenneth Landon, now Ken Landon, was the husband of the author, Margaret Landon, of "Anna and the King of Siam." Ken had followed my reporting from Singapore. I guess as I mentioned earlier it was the first political reporting that had been done from Singapore. Even though I wasn't a Chinese language officer, he liked the reporting. Ken had been a former missionary in Thailand for many years, a fluent speaker of Thai. So he said, "It seems to me that you might be assigned to Chiang Mai." Chiang Mai then and now is sort of the northern capital of Thailand. It is located in the northern Thailand triangle of what was then Burma, now Myanmar I believe, Thailand, and Laos. And as we used to like to discuss or mention to the border of southern Hunan, China and to its own capital. And as a result of I mentioned earlier, my reporting, which he had followed, he wanted me to take over reporting from that post. And also serve as principal officer. The vice consul at the post was the late Gloria Liske. His chief function was to funnel reporting available from the hill tribes who traveled with almost complete mobility through the mountains of Hunan in southern China and well into Laos and Thailand. They knew no borders. There were no iron curtains or fences or anything. They knew the mountain trails. And while their intelligence was somewhat primitive, nonetheless, you took what you got at that time, and we had very little in China. Liske obtained his information from an American missionary family that had lived and worked with the hill tribes for quite a number of years, knew their language and largely had their confidence. Again this was all about human intelligence. That was about all of the human intelligence we had from southern China, and very possibly we didn't have a lot more from central and northern. I don't know. My

reporting was limited basically to Thai conditions, Thai reactions to events in the area. They had little reaction to world events. I spoke some Thai before I got there. I had a tutor. I traveled with a consulate employee and did extensive traveling, and did not, of course, try to get into the hill tribes at all. The Thais as you probably know tend to be somewhat sycophantic. During WWII they did not resist the Japanese, and when we appeared to be resisting Chinese communists they gave us certainly lip support. And they are a very likable people. It is a "land of smiles." as it is often referred to. It was a pleasant assignment. It provided a change of seasons, which Bangkok didn't. It was hot and steamy. But it was pretty isolated. For awhile there I took a trip with the army attaché who was in Embassy Bangkok. We were able to rent a boat and travel the Mekong along the border area to Luang Prabang and then to Vientiane. There wasn't a great deal of intelligence obtained. First of all, we thought we rented the boat, but the boat was filled up with other travelers who no doubt paid some fare. However, there was really no travel in this area, this border area of Laos. It was already heavily infiltrated. We called on Laotian officials and some Thai border province chiefs, but I can't say that the intelligence was very significant. It was better than none. That is what we are there for, to find out what we could in the case of Vietnam. Thais just didn't have that much to reveal. A lot came through observation, I think. What, if anything, was going on? Were there troop formations? There were some we could see, particularly on the Laotian side.

*Q: This was Chinese massed on the Laos border in Laos? Whose troop movements did you see?*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, Laotian. There were Vietnamese in the area, but we didn't see them. They were Laotian troops. You had the Pathet Lao, the so-called Free Lao, and then those that were loyal to the central government in Vientiane.

*Q: So there was a civil war going on?*

SOMMERLATTE: There was a civil war. The Pathet Lao were in the north, and they were allied with the Vietnamese.

*Q: How big was Chiang Mai? Is it a big town?*

SOMMERLATTE: I think it is now. It was a town then of perhaps 25-30,000.

*Q: Okay, relatively small.*

SOMMERLATTE: I think now, of course I haven't been back, but it may be 100,000. There have been massive changes throughout Thailand.

*Q: Were you there alone, or did your wife go?*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, my wife was there. She came a little later because my son was still in school in England, and he had gone back to complete his year, and then she

brought him out.

*Q: Outside the consular activities, there probably wasn't much to do in a small remote area.*

SOMMERLATTE: No, because the Thais were not like Russians that were hostile. They had very modest homes. They weren't very comfortable in entertaining. I am always amused when I see Thai restaurants around here. The Thais never ate Thai food when they went out. They ate Chinese food. They thought that their food was second class. I don't recall in the northern town ever having seen a Thai restaurant. The Chinese restaurants were all over. And a little Thai capitalism, because their sanitary standards were very high. But I think except for the governor's house and the wealthy doctor in Plangoon, which is close to Chiang Mai (probably the second city in northern Thailand, maybe one or two others), I was never in a Thai house, and again it was not, I am sure, because of fear of anybody arrested. It was just such a vast difference of living standards that even the consulate employee with whom I traveled most would be uncomfortable inviting you into [his] home. I was in his home, but never to eat. He would sort of feel, "Well, what can I serve him when he had been at the consulate?" That would be a direct assumption, but nonetheless...

*Q: How many consulate employees were there so out of touch?*

SOMMERLATTE: Just two or three, the consul, the vice consul, and a consular assistant or secretary. One was male, at one point one was female. Mickey had little problems. He was running around with women of ill repute at one point. They had to send him home. There was nothing to do. We got him quite different from those they might back in Russia. It wasn't concern about blackmail. It was general appearances and so on.

*Q: Professional thought.*

SOMMERLATTE: He had a liaison. Then he would drink too much.

*Q: Somehow I could imagine you with your work being busy and occupied, but it sounds like cabin fever could be a real possibility for someone who goes to a remote place without much in the way of activities, a place that is relatively small. Was that a problem or was your wife and other wives able to somehow be productive?*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, I can't say my wife was totally happy there. It was a little more difficult because she didn't get along with the vice consul's wife. I liked both Roy and Marty, but I don't know whose fault it was. Betty wasn't being difficult, I think, but I just can't handle that. It would have been easier if they had been closer friends. One time, who was it? A fellow whose name escapes me, but he wrote Hawaii and numerous others. He has written so many popular books. He came to Chiang Mai. Marty sort of latched on to meet him at the airport or something. Betty never got to see him. That is the short of it. But there would be visitors, and we would have parties for them. People from Bangkok

would want to go to the wild, and people who had gone from the embassy would come up. Like this army attaché. So I would say with visitors if not once a week, then several times a month. Then we would entertain them, so it wasn't a matter of total isolation. Then there was a Seventh Day Adventist hospital, and there was the Presbyterian hospital. Some of which were Thai doctors. So there was some limited American community. Not much social activity with the Seventh Day Adventists [SDAs], they sort of tended to keep to themselves. But they had a doctor who was very welcome. He would, of course, treat us if we needed medical treatment. So you know we certainly were on speaking terms but the SDAs don't particularly socialize with others, and they have a different Sabbath. I am trying to think about, yes, the Presbyterians had a church service. So there was limited social life certainly, but I would say that Betty wasn't really unhappy.

*Q: How long were you there?*

SOMMERLATTE: Two years. I was there the first four or five months by myself until Betty brought my son. But it was a very interesting tour. I wouldn't have wanted to miss it. I don't think I have a desire to go back to any of these places. I have fond memories of them, but it would be a totally different city now.

*Q: Well, do you want to have a break here, or do you want to go on and tell us about your next assignment, which I think was still in that same part of the world?*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, it was, in fact, back in Washington.

*Q: Oh, it was. Okay.*

SOMMERLATTE: But at the end of the tour I was called back to Washington for assignment to Washington. Again when you ask about assignment, I sort of think that the process was "Well, we have got the job opening here." You have just been in Thailand. We need spots in the intelligence research section for somebody in Thailand and Malaysia. There wasn't anybody available, and I was available. The two years was up, so back I went. I wasn't particularly research oriented, I think. This was August of '57. Well, I had been in Thailand and Singapore. So one of the interesting aspects I recall of it was Ron Palmer, who later became an ambassador, was an analyst. I enjoyed working with him. I like to think I may have contributed to improvement of the drafting skills. He was a graduate of Howard University. But Ron went on to become an ambassador. He is now associated with some Foreign Service projects. He is a very fine and able person.

*Q: What was the nature of your research? Was it like people would send you information, and you would sort through it and try to identify patterns?*

SOMMERLATTE: We used to do reports from the field such as we had like I was sending in from Chiang Mai. Then what information the agency would filter over to us. A great deal of what we could pick up the army would give us access to. And it was the



Bureau of Intelligence and Research, which overlapped in some way with the CIA, but the Department wanted to have its own research bureaucratic rivalry, I guess. So that is what that function was. It wasn't terribly stimulating because we knew it was an overlapping function.

*Q: What was your output? Did you write reports or give briefings?*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes, we'd write reports for the desk, the Thai desk and the Malaysian desk. But that came to a conclusion after only about six or seven months. Interestingly enough, I think, it was because, one, the desk officer for Czechoslovakia was moved to another assignment in Prague. The desk was vacant. Nobody was there. So the office of east European affairs, Soviet and east European affairs then I suppose, know that I was a Soviet language officer, even though Czech isn't Russian and so on, they sort of figured they had a claim on me I think. They asked for me to be assigned to the Czech desk.

*Q: This was still in Washington.*

SOMMERLATTE: Still in Washington. Each country or area has a desk in Washington. This was in January of '58. So I served there. I was suspect because my wife had been declared persona non grata from Moscow. This may have been because the East European desk sort of liked to rub the Czech's nose in things.

*Q: Here is the renegade that we are going to make your officer.*

SOMMERLATTE: That's right, and they were the most subservient of the Soviet satellites, with the possible exception of Bulgaria.

*Q: This is not more research. This is...*

SOMMERLATTE: This is actual operations. Here you send not necessarily me, but on directive, you send instructions to the field. Do this, go to the foreign office, say that. You receive reports from the intelligence research section. You liaise with the other officers, the CIA and so on that have responsibility. I remember at that time, that Jack was the CIA Czech desk officer. I would deal with them, and then I would deal with the FBI officer who had the Czechs under surveillance in Washington. But they never talked to each other. The CIA and the FBI couldn't talk to each other. But I told them each about the other. So one day we had lunch together, and pretty soon I was out of the conversation. They were in on the personnel they knew a lot more about than I did, the activities of the individual.

*Q: Exactly. I would think they would be on top of all of those things.*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes, because we weren't that involved in who was going where and what time and so on, if there was some significance to it, and maybe there was. The report that he went to the corner drugstore at a particular time wasn't of any particular interest to

us. But the FBI was trying to find out the pattern. The CIA was interested in everything abroad. This is the very interesting thing now about the changes in government. At that time the thought of the FBI sending abroad beyond maybe one or two liaison officers... Now they are very much involved abroad. Similarly, the CIA, gosh, the idea of mounting a Cuban operation from this country, you know, that sounded stupid, of course. They are working together much more closely than they were.

...on the lack of cooperation at that time between the FBI and CIA, the rivalries and so on. I was introduced to an FBI person who was in charge of following the Czechs around and the CIA desk officer for Czechoslovakia. Incidentally, he, the CIA desk officer, actually later on became involved in the Cuban operation in Miami. I know that just from press, not from continuing contact. I think he still lives there. The FBI, I don't know... Anyway, I enjoyed that assignment very much. I worked for the late Alfred Scherer, who I suspect was not overly fond of me. In fact, I am almost certain, Al, or Bud as he was called, was a Yale graduate. I think I was placed on the desk by his superiors. He didn't resist. But he would observe my needling the Czechs perhaps, which I enjoyed doing. It wasn't quite his style. But it was of course mine. Having served in the Soviet Union I took and had the confrontational approach. So it was a matter of style I think. Also there were remnants of pre-war you know, the Foreign Service people pretty much composed of ivy league. It wasn't until the revisions of '46 and so on, that the Foreign Service was broadened. It still had the competitive exams and everything, but it had the oral exams too. But I think directives were sent out from upstairs, we want to broaden this thing and not just have the eastern establishment.

*Q: In terms of your aggressive relationships with the Czechs, could you give us an example of how that might have been? Were sharp words exchanged or was there some provocative act that you did?*

SOMMERLATTE: No, I would tend to needle them a bit. We were involved, at least from my end, we had economic negotiations that I will get into later on. We held the Czech gold, that is the tripartite commission held the Czech gold. It was kept partly in America, in U.S. and West European banks. And at that meeting we had the other members, I think they were the British and French, tripartite, in our pocket. That means that if they didn't get the signal to release it, they wouldn't. Nobody would worry about it, about releasing the gold. What we wanted was compensation for our nationalization claims. That is the Czechs nationalized American property, and we, the American government, wanted to get compensation for them. Then there were a host of other economic issues involved. Those issues arose, they were primarily exchanges, often exchanges. We tried to resolve them in Washington, and we controlled the matter pretty much from Washington. I remember, Dr. Duda and his sidekick would come in. I have forgotten his name. Incidentally, Dr. Duda ended up on the American desk in Prague when I first served there as first secretary. I can't give the specific example, but some issue would come up. Maybe they would question about some property being American.

*Q: I see.*

SOMMERLATTE: Those weren't the only issues, but the central issue was compensation for nationalization of property. There were perhaps 20 other side issues that were included in the negotiations. But it was pretty detailed stuff. We wanted the whole ball of wax. I am getting ahead of the story here, but ultimately we got when the gold was divided, they could give us the whole ball of wax and still have some money. This was before the devaluation of gold, still on the gold standard. Again I have forgotten the amount of the claims and so on. We weren't going to go much below the full value. And after the devaluation, they wanted the money and they could easily pay off the claims from the proceeds. It was their gold. There was no question about that. There wasn't any issue about the gold being theirs; we just seized it right after the war and held it. Because it had been, we wanted to keep it from getting into German custody. So, so much for that.

*Q: All right you have told us a little bit. Go on and tell us whatever you want. How long were you on this Czech desk?*

SOMMERLATTE: About close to three years.

*Q: Wow, long assignment.*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes, it was. As I said, economic negotiations. Then my next assignment was to the American consulate general in Munich. There I served as the eastern Affairs officer and liaison with Radio Liberty, Radio Free Europe, the CIA financed radios. This job was exactly what it suggested. It was to act as liaison. Just pass what intelligence we might have, and get what intelligence they might have available to send back to the Department. Because again, their reporting was essentially to the CIA. If we could pick up what they were revealing, and they of course got reports from the agency. So it was just sort of gamesmanship. I don't know if that is the phrase, but they could reveal what they wanted to reveal or thought they could. They also, the Department wanted to have somebody there to sort of keep an eye on Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe to make sure they didn't go off the deep end, didn't get things going as in the Hungarian revolution where they were expecting invasion assistance from American forces. Now that would not likely be true of Radio Liberty, which broadcast to the Soviet Union. But Radio Free Europe where we broadcast to countries that were contiguous, like Czechoslovakia, hopes might arise that we would follow up broadcasts with invasions if uprisings arose.

*Q: They basically through Radio Free Europe got the impression that America would step forward and help the Hungarians if they revolted?*

SOMMERLATTE: I believe they did. Or at least they were hopeful. The revolt was put down, and that, of course, destroyed their ability. The function of my job was to see that these hopes didn't get unleashed again.

*Q: I think somehow, Germany generally and maybe Munich especially would be an*

*interesting place for a Foreign Service officer in the sense that a lot of things may well be happening. Is that right, or am I just off base a bit?*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, Germany was interesting at that time. It still is, I am sure. You know, East Germany just didn't sort of process then that they had separated from West Germany. We could drive right up to the East German and Czech borders. So the Munich area, when people came out from Prague, they came to Nuremburg, virtually... I don't know the exact crossing point.

*Q: Did you ever have a reason to go to Berlin, for example, fly in?*

SOMMERLATTE: Not from Munich. I don't recall. I did of course, from Moscow. There we probably pushed the envelope when we tried to cross over. I did with my diplomatic passport from Russia into East Berlin. That sort of puzzled me. I am flipping back now to when I was in Russia. That sort of puzzled us, because here you are with an American passport and you are supposed to be able to go, and yet you had a Soviet visa to the Soviet Union mind you, not to East Germany. I had pretty decent access around East Berlin. German was my second language. I didn't do much reporting. That was a function of those stationed in Germany. I was just there casually.

*Q: Was there anything interesting or exciting that broke while you were there that you maybe give to Radio Free Europe or Radio Liberty?*

SOMMERLATTE: No, they were very conversant with all developments. There wasn't anything particular, I was only there a few months, of particular significance at the time. I enjoyed the tour. It was very nice housing close to the consulate general. It was from there, although I was still assigned to the consulate general, that I was detailed on temporary duty to Prague to head the economic negotiations team.

*Q: Okay, this would be a continuation of more or less what you were doing back in Washington when you left.*

SOMMERLATTE: Exactly.

*Q: Okay, why don't you tell us about that then?*

SOMMERLATTE: Well, again, I must confess that the specifics, resolve that gold and nationalization plans. That was the central purpose of these negotiations. I don't think I can recall at this juncture, the peripheral issues. They may have all been resolved. How much are you going to give us when you get your gold back?

*Q: How long did the negotiations last?*

SOMMERLATTE: They just finally broke down because we weren't going to give them the gold and they weren't going to give us the money that we wanted.

*Q: So this went on for several months.*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, God, for years. It never was resolved until gold was devalued. The amount of gold exceeded the nationalization question. Then rather quickly, I was out of it by this time. They rather quickly made up. There was plenty left over. They saw they weren't going to get it, so there wasn't much delay after that. As I mentioned these other issues were relatively minor. So, then I was detailed because first secretary in Prague (his name escapes me) was being reassigned after his two year tour. Again maybe I shouldn't get into the personnel, but these are all factors. You asked about assignments. The first secretary was a very able officer, and a very bright officer. I think he is living today, perhaps in a think tank or as research staff. But he was serving under an extremely personable old school ambassador named Wailes. He just rubbed Wailes the wrong way. I wasn't trying to get his job or anything. I was just in there for negotiations. But Wailes sort of liked me. This is just how things go in the Department, or they did at that time. His tour was up. They asked if he would like to stay a third year. He wasn't involved in economic issues, particularly that one. He had learned the language. Wailes said two years is enough. He could be a touch arrogant. But Wailes is anything but arrogant. Wailes was just like an old shoe, but he didn't like to be talked down to. I am getting into a lot of personalities, but this is stuff that I think, isn't in the history book. They are items that I recall very well. He said, "Well you have got this guy Sommerlatte out there." I guess, and the ambassador had a lot of influence on assignments. "Why don't you bring him in here? He is here most of the time anyway on negotiations. He can handle it right here. So the first secretary at the end of his two years, without prejudice or anything, came out and I replaced him. This was the political/economic section. Two other officers. It was a small section. At that time we had a small compact embassy. Now let's see. We got up to 1962. There it was much of the same, reporting, political, economic, supervising the others, two officers, Norm Hanley and Frank Trinkka. I think it is the late Norm Hanley now, I am not sure. Two able officers, no conflicts or anything, no personality. I think anybody could have taken a job and they would have accommodated work.

*Q: What time of year was this that you took over? Spring?*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes, I think late spring, July, something like that, summer.

*Q: So Kennedy was still President, and the Cold War was raging.*

SOMMERLATTE: It was raging. And no sooner did I get in than Wailes decided to resign. He hadn't told me. There had been an incentive to get people out, and they offered a bonus for early retirement. Not force him out, but if you retire now... He had no children. Wailes waited until that offer was over and said, "I got a little money," and didn't like the idea of being bought out.

*Q: That is interesting. It was almost like saying, "Who needs your money. I will retire when I get ready," and it was shortly after the offer.*

SOMMERLATTE: It was just as soon as the offer was over that he sent in his letter of resignation.

*Q: What a guy!*

SOMMERLATTE: That was a disappointment to me because I just found him a pleasure to work with, and his wife was very charming. She liked our family and everything, my wife. Well, so after he left, in comes a new ambassador who had been deputy chief of mission in Rome with the improbably name of Outerbridge Horsey.

*Q: Holy mackerel.*

SOMMERLATTE: Outerbridge was fluent in Italian. He knew Italian politics inside out as well as the Vatican. He really was an Italian specialist. But Outerbridge knew nothing about Eastern Europe except that it was there, and he was aware of the Cold War. He was not an idiot in any sense. He was an intelligent man. But he had no specialist experience. Why he was selected I have no idea. Again these are things I didn't speculate on why I had been selected for different assignments, but on ambassadorial assignments I can. I guess they felt "He is ready for an embassy." I suspect something like this. Wailes opened one up for us by resigning. Well here is Outer as he was called, ought to have an embassy. He is due for it in his career. He had been number two. I suspect that; I don't know. Because he, and I don't think he himself was thrilled by it. He knew he wasn't going to get Rome, where was number two's don't succeed number one's, and that often is a political assigned post. There are probably many more, you know, a place like Lisbon, Spain, Sweden, where a career man might be assigned. He wouldn't get England, I don't think. That is also normally a political post. But some posts in western Europe I am sure would have been more to his liking, or South America. But this was where the vacancy was. This was where an embassy was open and this is where Outer came. Well he wasn't difficult to work with because I don't think he is unusual, but he really, it was more a matter of educating him than having him criticize or anything. He might ask questions, but he wouldn't say you can't do this, you can't send a report or anything. But we weren't at all close as though a Wailes relationship. Mrs. Horsey was very pleasant, entertained obviously very well, very ably. Knew how clearly. So that was a factor in the Prague assignment. I perhaps should have done more reporting than I did, but again Prague wasn't a stimulating place from the standpoint of reporting. Of course my contact at the foreign office as I mentioned earlier, at the foreign ministry was Dr. Duda. The Czechs had brought him back from Washington and decided he is going to be on the American desk where he will deal with Dr. Duda.

*Q: What kind of a relationship did you have with him?*

SOMMERLATTE: Needling. He, alike. But I have often wondered what happened to him after things broke up in the iron curtain because he was very subservient to the Soviet line. Never a beep on that. He had a sidekick, too, whose name won't come to mind. It

wasn't unpleasant like Russia. I was able to get a few Czechs in to the house. Czech doctors seemed to be willing to come for some reason. Apparently they didn't realize that almost certainly we were taped, but they didn't like the regime. They had little hesitation in expressing their opposition. In the beer halls and so on you could sometimes meet some Czechs. My Czech wasn't all that good, not as good as my Russian.

*Q: A beautiful city, too.*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, it is. Somewhat dreary in a way. Then you have Bratislava, the capital of the now separate Slovak Republic. You add the Slovak tensions within the Czechoslovakia, that were of interest but not very openly expressed. The Soviets didn't want a separate Slovakia. There wasn't going to be one while they were in charge. But you could detect those. The Slovak language is different from the Czech. It is a little closer to Russian. I couldn't... I was concentrating on Czech, so communication was more difficult. Sometimes they would use some German down there with the more educated people. But those were interesting forays. You could travel more freely in Czechoslovakia than you could in the Soviet Union. There were more places to dine. There were some very nice restaurants in Prague, small and cozy. Not fabulous, but compared to Soviet food very good. So the life there was less confining and access to the border, to Germany was a few hours, three or four hours. So I had no complaints about the tour there. It was about what I would have expected. It was enjoyable. On completion of that tour...

*Q: Which lasted how many years were you, you were in Munich, then Prague.*

SOMMERLATTE: The tour ended in '62, July of '62.

*Q: Now as I understand you, you became the chief under Wailes.*

SOMMERLATTE: The political economic section.

*Q: Yes, in early '62 and by July of '62 you were moving on to another assignment?*

SOMMERLATTE: Yes. I was detailed then to, no I am sorry. I was in Prague in '62. I was detailed to Serbo-Croatian language training at the Foreign Service Institute in February of '64.

*Q: Oh, so you were there for '62, '63, and '64.*

SOMMERLATTE: Right.

*Q: Did anything change from your perspective when Kennedy was assassinated and Johnson became president?*

SOMMERLATTE: No.

*Q: The Cold War was still the Cold War.*

SOMMERLATTE: There was complete carry over. Nothing. Really I don't think there was any change until the Reagan-Gorbachev exchange "Tear down your wall, Mr. Gorbachev." Of course it was torn down. Jumping to that point, about which I don't have any special knowledge, Gorbachev made the mistake from his standpoint of loosening up politically but not economically. The Chinese have done just the reverse. They have loosened the strings economically; they have kept things pretty tight politically. Once the economic bounds were loosened, things just came apart in the Soviet Union. But that sure didn't happen under Brezhnev. Even the Brezhnev-Nixon stuff really didn't do anything much for relations. Oh, I am not downplaying the importance of the nuclear bomb threat, but in my view again, this is my observation I guess, I don't think that was terribly great. I think we did the right things. But Stalin, knew I think, even Stalin certainly his successors, Malenkov, Khrushchev, they knew what a nuclear bomb was. They knew we had more of them. There is always the possibility of an accident. I am not in any way being critical of our postwar policy. I might be critical of current policy which I think might be placing too much trust in Russia. We seem to forget the present head is an ex-KGB man. Not dumb. The brightest men went into the KGB. That is the way you got abroad and a higher standard of living and more of everything else in the Soviet Union. He is not stupid at all. But that is what he came from. He is going to defend Russia as it exists now. I think he wouldn't mind putting parts of it back together. I am not sure why Byelorussia except in things more Catholic than the Pope stays separate. They are still desire a standard pretty Stalinist in their approach or close to that. They get very few little leeway, so maybe he just doesn't want that. He doesn't want to try to take that on. Certainly I would hope they would never try to retake the Baltic states. That would be brutal. Now I am jumping back to the Soviet, the Russian tour. No we haven't reached the second Russian tour yet have we.

*Q: Not quite yet.*

SOMMERLATTE: Oh, I'll get into that when we get there. I want to discuss the visit to the Baltic states. Anyway, back to the Department and the Serbo-Croatian training.

*Q: This is '64. You are back in Washington.*

SOMMERLATTE: 1964. Then I am assigned to Zagreb as consul general. Now Zagreb was the capital of the constituent republic of Croatia, now the independent republic of Croatia. All of the constituent republics have split apart since Tito's death.

*Q: Even Montenegro? I thought at one point Serbia and Montenegro...*

SOMMERLATTE: Ah, yes, you are right. Whether or not, I am not entirely sure what the status is. They have a considerable measure of autonomy. I think probably right that they sort of acknowledged they don't want many Serbians around. Of course they have got the Kosovo problem down there. Serbia is a mess trying to hold the whole thing together as it



was. If they would come back to their borders and didn't try to move into Kosovo, maybe they would have a pretty united population. But I am just not sure right now the status of Montenegro. I think you are right it is probably not formal or anything. Anyway, you know, they have got the Albanian problem too with Albanian minorities. Croats solved this by expelling the Serbs. The Serbs' attitude was that was a pretty rough solution. They expelled all the non-Serb minority after the breakup of Yugoslavia. In Tito's Yugoslavia that had broken away from the Soviet Union. It was a grey, not an iron curtain. But it didn't happen at all like the Soviet Union or like Czechoslovakia. Travel was relatively free. You could travel to Trieste. You had no problem getting a visa from there on out if you wanted to go to Italy. I recall, again here I pushed the envelope from time to time. I did a lot of driving around. I would get to the border. I always found the border areas interesting. I am fascinated by border areas, by the ethnic problem, the diversity, what language are they actually speaking. Yugoslavs get a little sensitive with you up against the Hungarian border of both states. So I remember having to dinner the equivalent of the KGB chief. It was clear, they would come in and have dinner and so on without any big problem in Marshall Tito's Yugoslavia. He trusted his personnel and did not make visits a big deal. So I told him about this incident when I had been pulled over and stopped and so on. He assured me, I think probably sincerely, but that was not directed from the center, meaning that he didn't have anything to do with the harassment. I think that is probably true, I don't know, but it was.

The surveillance or the lack of surveillance, the entertainment that was possible of some Yugoslavs, not all. But as I mentioned, even a senior equivalent of what was the KGB came to my house when invited. I knew who he was and he knew I knew and so on. He is the one that made this, this wasn't for the record when he said it.

*Q: I think so.*

SOMMERLATTE: It is my belief that it probably wasn't. So one of the great pleasures of this assignment was that in the consular district was Dubrovnik, the city of Dubrovnik. Croatian I guess, but certainly multicultural, and absolutely gorgeous on the Adriatic. My French colleague, Guy Monge, and I both Christmases I was there, traveled to Dubrovnik, nice accommodations, as good a hotel as it had in Yugoslavia, three star or so. I hope, I trust, I think it wasn't badly destroyed in the war. I think it was spared quite a bit. But they are a very special breed, a different breed of people there. I must confess, I don't know the degree of ethnicity. There has been an influx of other cultures, but it was an interesting thing. I would say they were pretty much apolitical, but they had a nice standard of living, probably better than most of Yugoslavia. Keep in mind they knew there was an iron curtain, and they knew that Tito wasn't in it, and they had a lot better existence than people living behind the iron curtain. So you had a pretty relaxed existence in Yugoslavia. There weren't to my knowledge, I am sure there were lots and lots of political prisoners because Marshall Tito didn't encourage much diversity. There weren't death camps, there wasn't Barracuda, not that kind of thing like the Gulag Archipelago and so on. You had a much more benign environment. You probably know that Tito was a Croatian, and it is fascinating how he as a Croatian was able to hold that country

together. The Serbs did not resist him obviously. Probably only a Croat could have done that job. He had a sterling war record of course. Mikhailovic, well, he went down the tubes. I don't know much about the facts on that. I don't know whether we let him down or what, but anyway Tito was the survivor. I don't think there was really much more in store for what was Yugoslavia then at the time, but today, look at it post Tito, yes there are some more freedoms I think in the area. Now Slovenia is a different cup of tea. The Slovenians were almost a northern country. Their language is quite different. They were very close to Trieste, on the border. They probably would have no doubt should have been included in.

*End of interview*