

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

AMBASSADOR ROBERT WEISBERG

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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[Note: this interview was not completed or edited by Ambassador Weisberg.]

Q: All right, today is the 27th of November, 2012, interview with Robert Weisberg, W-E-I-S-B-E-R-G. And you go by Bob or --

WEISBERG: Rob.

Q: Rob. All right Rob, well let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

WEISBERG: Born up the road in Hagerstown, Maryland. And --

Q: Good heavens, that's the first person I've ever known who had any connection to Hagers.

WEISBERG: Right. There are not too many of them there in the Foreign Service.

Q: No.

WEISBERG: And I grew up in a little town near Hagerstown called Ringgold, population about 149, right on the Pennsylvania border on the eastern end of Washington County. And this all took place in 1950.

Q: OK. So let's start. First, what do you know about the Weisbergs?

WEISBERG: On my father's side, my grandparents, his parents both emigrated from what was then Russia, now Ukraine, about 1912, 1913, and settled in Baltimore. My grandfather was a cabinetmaker and a carpenter. And this went on through the teens and the 1920s. And one of the things he was doing with his hands was making stills. And he realized the money wasn't in the stills. The money was in the liquid in the stills. So, he became a bootlegger.

Q: We're talking about the prohibition period.

WEISBERG: That's right. And he stayed that way until 1933, and then he went legit and opened a bar over in Liberty Heights in Baltimore called Weisberg's Friendly Corner.

And later on, if we ever get up to the time I was sworn in as ambassador we can return to that.

Q: OK.

WEISBERG: Because it did come into play.

Q: All right.

WEISBERG: And --

Q: And on your mother's side, where did she --

WEISBERG: Mother's side. My mother's grandparents came from a town called Iasi, Romania, right near the Moldavian border. They came in the -- let me see. Must have been 1870s, 1880s. And her -- and my mother's father was born in what was then Eastern Ukraine, Poland, and he went to University of Vienna. He emigrated around the turn of the century. My mother was born in Brookline, Mass. She grew up in Brooklyn. My parents met in Baltimore during the war.

Q: Well, what were her parents doing?

WEISBERG: Her parents?

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Her father was a polyglot, very well-educated man. Quite colorful. Once made a bet that he could learn Italian in a month sufficiently to address a group of Italians, and he won. That man was never wrong about anything, what I hear from my mother and uncle and aunt. Most arrogant man that ever walked the face of the earth, but he was always right. In any case, he, he was -- used his education, made a lot of money in the first part of the 20th century. But he then unwise --

Q: Doing what?

WEISBERG: He was -- well, he did a lot of things. He used to handle the affairs of fresh off the boat immigrants, because he spoke so many languages. And he got in a lot of investment schemes, but unfortunately invested in rubles right before the Russian Revolution. Lost everything, disappeared for some years. And my grandmother finally heard that he was down in New Orleans. Went down and fetched him back to an apartment in Brooklyn where they were all living. And after that I don't think he ever worked anymore. But he was a great, great grandfather for a little kid.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: And my mother grew up across from the Brooklyn Museum. She went to Brooklyn College. As I say, during the war she met my father who was from Baltimore. And then they lived out in Colorado for a few years, came back to Maryland right about the time I was born, and my father was teaching in Hagerstown, and then later on at Mount St. Mary's College in Emmitsburg.

Q: What was he teaching?

WEISBERG: Economics and history.

Q: Mm-hmm. Now, coming from where they came from, were there Jewish immigrants coming from --

WEISBERG: Yep, across the board.

Q: Were you getting any stories about pogroms or life in sort of the border area in Russia, or not?

WEISBERG: Grandmother was a little girl. She was left for dead in a pogrom. Lay, as I heard about it, for about two or three days. And when they were picking up bodies, somebody realized that she was still breathing. And she always had a scar on her forehead.

Q: Ooh.

WEISBERG: Remind you of that. She lived into the 1970s, but never learned much English. My grandfather on the -- her husband, talking about my father's parents. Grandfather who was the bootlegger, was quite an outgoing man, so I spent a lot more time with him.

Q: Yeah. Was your family -- sort of from religion -- very Jewish or modular or how would you put it?

WEISBERG: Jewish light (*laughs*).

Q: Well, that's -- they came --

WEISBERG: (*laughs*)

Q: -- they came to it at a later period?

WEISBERG: Well, I mean they were -- they had -- I mean everybody went to synagogue, everybody had bar mitzvahs and things like that. But it was a -- on the other hand, they all ate shellfish and had good times in life.

Q: Yeah. Was there -- you know, I've seen accounts and movies and all about the Jewish community in Baltimore. Was your family involved in -- was Baltimore sort of the home city?

WEISBERG: Well, well, yes, for my father's side of the family. Because he was one of five siblings. For them -- in fact, my cousin right now is president of one of the congregations over there. So, on the social side, yeah. They have stayed involved. But I mean it's -- but for me it's much less, because up in Hagerstown --

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: -- was a very, very small Jewish community. And a matter of fact, in Ringgold, we were the Jews in the valley.

Q: Yeah. Well, Hagerstown is basically sort of a strong German influence there, isn't there?

WEISBERG: Yes.

Q: I mean Pennsylvania Dutch, whatever you want to call it.

WEISBERG: You're right.

Q: I know I grew up to -- every once in a while, my wife goes up there. There's a wonderful Bavarian restaurant.

WEISBERG: Over in Shavertown.

Q: Yeah. But there's also -- I've been to that one, but there's one in Hagerstown. Oh, very good. Yes.

WEISBERG: That might postdate me. I'll have to -- I've been out a long time.

Q: Yeah, well it's -- I don't know, Google Russian -- I mean Jewish -- German restaurant in Hagerstown.

WEISBERG: OK.

Q: And you'll get it. And really good strudel.

WEISBERG: Well, that's good to know. I mean I can drag my roots up there. She doesn't like to see my roots much, but maybe I can convince her (*laughs*).

Q: OK. Did your parents graduate from college or did they go to school --

WEISBERG: They did. Both of my parents did.

Q: Which is unusual for the period. I'm still interviewing people whose parents for the most part weren't college graduates.

WEISBERG: Well, father graduated from Maryland and he had a master's from Colorado. My mother graduated from Brooklyn College.

Q: Mm-hmm. Well, what do you recall from, you want to say -- what's the name, Ringgold?

WEISBERG: Ringgold.

Q: R-I-N-G-O-L-D?

WEISBERG: R-I-N-G -- well, it depends which side you come into. If you come in one side of it, it's two G's, if you come up the other road it has one.

Q: Ah.

WEISBERG: Take your pick. R-I-N-G-G-O-L-D.

Q: OK. What do you recall? When do you start remembering things around there? From 1950?

WEISBERG: Well, I like to tell my wife I remember things from when I was four and a half months old and the house was being built, but she's not buying it. But it was, it was nice. It's, it's just a rural place. It's been pretty untouched through all the years. Mainly, people as you say are German Lutheran stock. There's a Mennonite community. Everybody was Republican, except for my parents and one other fellow named Jennings Sheets. And as my mother would always say, "But everybody always thought Jennings was a little strange."

Q: (laughs)

WEISBERG: But they were very nice people. And I just missed by a year from going to a one-room school with six grades in Ringgold. But that summer, when I was getting ready to go to kindergarten, they opened up a new elementary school in Smithsburg. So that's where I went for the first six years, until sixth grade.

Q: What was the school like?

WEISBERG: The one in Smithsburg, where I went?

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Well, at the time it was architecturally quite, quite something. It was one of the first of these, these flat all-brick -- they'd gotten away from the post-war design you saw. The high school looked like that. And I enjoyed it. I mean it was a -- all the teachers I had but one were women. All, some of the really the best teachers -- to this day I remember lessons I had there. And it had a very, a very engaged principal named Margaret Staffer. But everybody knew everybody. Everybody knew my father, because he was in the education business. And so, it was a pretty, pretty -- you know, if -- you couldn't pull much in class, because the teacher would think nothing of just driving up to the house and saying, "Well, I had trouble with your son today." So, you had to keep the straight and narrow up there. I mean only 600 people in Smithsburg. That was a metropolis compared to Ringgold.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: This is this little --

Q: Well, what sort of classes -- what classes appealed to you and what didn't?

WEISBERG: Well, I'll tell you one thing I remember, because you always kind of compare what you learn and what your kids learn and what's around. And I spend my summers now up in Canada. And when I was in, I think it was sixth grade -- it was sixth, yeah, it was -- half the year we studied Mexico and Latin America and half the year we studied Canada. And you know, I don't think anybody does that now at that level. And, and --

Q: No.

WEISBERG: -- I remember telling my wife about it. In fact, our Canadian friends said, "It's pretty good you know this stuff."

And I said, "Well, it stuck in after all these years."

Q: Yeah, of course.

WEISBERG: So, I certainly remember that. I was a pretty good student. Managed to get pulled out of second grade and jumped over to fourth. Didn't do too much of that, but thanks to that my handwriting is terrible.

Q: Yeah. Well, today --

WEISBERG: That's my, that's my excuse.

Q: Well, today of course handwriting doesn't count for much.

WEISBERG: Don't even need it.

Q: As a matter fact --

WEISBERG: Only when I write my son checks.

Q: We're told -- our daughter said, "You know, when you write your grandson, you might type it out or print it, because he can't read cursive," (laughs). It's --

WEISBERG: That's right.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

WEISBERG: Sorry?

Q: Were you much of a reader?

WEISBERG: Always.

Q: In elementary school.

WEISBERG: Always. Always. Everything.

Q: Do you recall any particular books --

WEISBERG: Well, when I was --

Q: -- that stand out?

WEISBERG: -- eight I got hooked on one subject. And it's -- to this day captures me. And that's sports, particularly baseball. But I read a lot of other things too. I mean I was lucky. I read fast. I had -- I mean parents who were educated, really put a premium on this stuff. We were always talking about it. I mean I read a lot, read it early.

Q: Have brothers or sisters?

WEISBERG: Nope.

Q: So, you got the full brunt of --

WEISBERG: That's right.

Q: So, what were the types of recreation for kids in Ringgold in that first few years?

WEISBERG: Mainly baseball. Learn how to ride a bicycle, so it was a very, very nice area to ride because there wasn't any traffic. All these country roads. We were right in the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains there. Beautiful valley. Still is. Still is. Did a lot of that.

In fact, I remember riding north one day from the house about a mile and a half and looking down on the road, and there was one of the original Mason Dixon stones.

Q: My gosh.

WEISBERG: Yeah. Cross over to Pennsylvania going towards Waynesboro. Which is actually closer than Hagerstown.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: So, we had kind of two mini-hubs.

Q: Was there any residue of the Civil War there or not, or -- I mean I was just thinking the armies coming up to Gettysburg.

WEISBERG: Well, there is. I mean the -- I mean the main thing in the county is, is Antietam.

Q: Yeah, well that's down --

WEISBERG: Well, that is not too far. That is only about 15 miles from my house.

Q: Oh yeah, that's right.

WEISBERG: That's right going the other direction from Hagerstown, further south. We were northwest. But I mean that's -- but the other main thing people remember it for is that the reason Hill ended up in Gettysburg was he couldn't find any shoes for his guys in Hagerstown.

Q: Yeah. And for Antietam they had the Battle of South Mountain too, which was --

WEISBERG: Also.

Q: There's a great inn there. So, what were the politics of the area? Was it all Republican pretty much?

WEISBERG: Still is.

Q: Still is?

WEISBERG: Still is. It's also not been too economically fortunate area. They, they had an old Fairchild plant up there that closed. There was a lot of unemployment. Mac truck came in which helped some. Lot of farmers. But it's, it's not close enough to either Washington or Baltimore to get the benefit employment down there, of being able to commute. Frederick's done much better, because that's 23 miles closer.

Q: Yeah. That's beautiful, beautiful place. Well then, that's gorgeous country.

WEISBERG: It is.

Q: I enjoy driving up there. I enjoy seeing Antietam. I'm a Civil War buff.

WEISBERG: It's great. I know, I was just there not too long ago. And when I was very, very little, my father had two horses. One was named Lady, one was named Ringall. Black horses, mother and son. And he used to -- he had a buggy and he used to take my mother all around on the road. And he sold the horses a little bit later. But the -- I still have the lamps from the buggy. I put them up in my apartment down in Florida.

Q: You get up through the sixth grade. Is that --

WEISBERG: That's right.

Q: Then where?

WEISBERG: Well, what happened then is my parents didn't -- they weren't too wild about the high school in Smithsburg. So, my father worked an arrangement where I could take a longer commute. I was right on the extreme edge of a bus route. And I went into a junior high school, it's called -- down in Hagerstown -- North Potomac Junior High School. And I was there for two years, seventh and eighth grade.

Q: Did you get involved in extracurricular things there?

WEISBERG: Well, a little bit. Not too much. I mean maybe sports. I didn't do too much like that.

Q: And then high school.

WEISBERG: Well, that was a bit of a change. I, like you, went to a private school then.

Q: Where'd you --

WEISBERG: Went to a school near Antietam called St. James School. Quite old, founded 1842. Admiral Mahan went there. The one who wrote Influence of Sea Power. And then a few others. I just saw someone else who had gone -- Marsh Clark used to write for Time magazine, a few others. Mainly a boarding school. Lot of kids from the District of Columbia (D.C.) But I, I was one of very few day students. Episcopalian school and I don't have any -- it had a few Jews, not too many. Couple of Catholics, couple of _____, all white guys. Although later on we had a couple of exchange students from Asia. It was a long line of pretty, twisted, bigoted place among the student body. On the other hand, education was great. It was strange.

Q: Well, that's what I went through. Kent was run by Episcopalian monks when I went there.

WEISBERG: Well, the purpose, St. James, they said, was to train young Christian gentlemen. So, I really didn't make it on any of them, although I was young for a little while.

Q: Well, did you find any prejudice or problems with being a Jew in this particular area?

WEISBERG: Yeah. Oh yeah.

Q: OK, talk about it a bit.

WEISBERG: I mean, as I say, it wasn't a school that just tolerated prejudice, I felt it encouraged it. I mean it's, it's pretty twisted in some of the approaches among the kids. And the other pro -- I just saw somebody. I hadn't seen him for 40 years, a guy I graduated with. He's living in London now. His wife was asking me how I liked it, because he had loved the place. And I said, "I certainly didn't." But I got through it. I mean I, I was a good student. Wasn't hard for me. So, I was lucky in that respect. The education was very good.

Q: I interviewed Robert Strauss --

WEISBERG: *(laughs)* You'll get some colorful language with him.

Q: -- came out of Texas and he said at a very early age his mother said, "Now, you're Jewish and that means you're one of God's chosen people. But don't tell anybody about it, but just understand that." And he felt really good about strutting around, feeling that God had chosen him.

WEISBERG: I mean it kept me awake nights, but it was, it was a bit -- I mean I was glad I was a day student, because I still had friends in Hagerstown. They didn't have to be Jews, just I mean I was a townie. So, it was a little kind of good that I wasn't a boarding student there.

Q: Well, boarding students, part of the problem is they do isolate them.

WEISBERG: Yeah. Years later I went back and I was talking to the director of alumni affairs and I said, "You know, school looks a lot -- much, much better to me now. You got girls in it. You got people of all these diverse backgrounds."

And she said, "Well, I'm glad to hear you say that, because we have all, a lot of alumni your age. They don't like what's happened to the school. They don't want to give us money."

And I said, "Well, I can see why you've got a bit of a problem. They don't want to give you money because of the way the school is. I don't want to give you any money because of the way the school was."

Q: Yep. Well, it's --

WEISBERG: *(laughs)*

Q: By the time you got to junior high, were you following world events much?

WEISBERG: The first time I began to -- I remember in November 1964 my -- well, I was certainly aware domestically of the Civil Rights Movement. I mean that was pretty big. And I was aware of it a lot because of, because of the baseball. Because I'd grown up and my mother was from Brooklyn and she used to tell me so much about Jackie Robinson and what he had done. So, I was quite attuned to that. In 1964, November, I remember being home alone on election night for some reason, turning on the television (TV) and really being caught up in it. I mean everybody knew Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) was going to win. It was quite interesting. But nonetheless, I would say still up to about 1967 I was kind of a typical American boy. Girls, sports, cars. Not always in that order.

Q: Now, how about TV? Was TV pretty important, or?

WEISBERG: I just, you know, watched a lot of sports, watched some shows, sure. Movies, always liked them.

Q: Yeah. Well then, high school. You went to high school.

WEISBERG: At St. James.

Q: At St. James.

WEISBERG: Graduated there in 1967.

Q: Well, how about extracurricular things there?

WEISBERG: Well, I did, you know, I played sports there, played, played mainly tennis. Few others. I think I was on the yearbook staff.

Q: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

WEISBERG: I mean I didn't really like hanging out with these guys, so I mean it wasn't *(laughs)* -- when I could get home from the school that was fine.

Q: Yeah. Well, these schools do sort of prepare you -- they're prep schools -- prepare you for college. Where did you go to college?

WEISBERG: Well, I didn't go right away. But when I graduated in 1967, I got an English Speaking Union scholarship. So, I went for a year to Bryanston School in Dorset in the United Kingdom (UK), and loved it.

Q: what sort of school was this?

WEISBERG: What they would call a public school, we would call private school. The English Speaking Union program. I'm trying to think of a -- like two funnels facing one another. And you apply to the program and then if you get accepted, then the, the board decides what would be a good match-up of you with a school in your other country. And it really was, was fortunate. In fact, I'm still very, very close to a couple guys I went to school with there and saw two of them this past summer. And really -- there I was at a boarding school, very interesting. I had been to Europe once before with my parents, but this was the first time I really lived there. And certainly, there I began to get caught up with foreign affairs, because at that school Vietnam was very much on everybody's mind and the first time, I really found foreigners spending -- I mean they knew so much about the United States (U.S.) They had a lot of critical views of it. And I also traveled around Europe on vacation, so it was quite an eye-opening year. Great year.

Q: How did you travel around Europe?

WEISBERG: Well, if I had a couple bucks in my pocket I took the train. If I didn't, I hitchhiked. But I had some good rides too.

Q: Yeah. Sometimes as I drive around and look around, I haven't seen a hitchhiker in years.

WEISBERG: No, I think it's a lost art.

Q: Too bad.

WEISBERG: But I got some great rides and interesting conversations. I had rides from Poles, from Greeks, from Germans (*laughs*).

Q: Well, did you find yourself defending our involvement in Vietnam or questioning it? How'd you find that?

WEISBERG: The more I found out about it, the less I was interested in defending it.

Q: Yeah. Well then, you spent a year there at the time.

WEISBERG: I did. I did.

Q: Did you --

WEISBERG: I played tennis there, played rugby there. Also, first time -- I had only done Latin. I hadn't studied a modern language. So, when I got to Bryanston, they said, "What would you like to study?"

And I said, "French."

And they said, "Well, we usually start that at an earlier age, and you're a senior boy at 17."

So, I said, "What's available?"

"German and Russian."

And so, I said, "Well, Russia is where, where my family came from. I would like to study that." And that began my familiarity with that language, which I later studied in college and later used in the Foreign Service.

Q: Well, where'd you go from Bryanston?

WEISBERG: Came back in 1968 and the next four years I went to what was then a small Quaker school up in Pennsylvania. Now it's non-denominational. Called Haverford College.

Q: Oh yeah, well I've known several people at Haverford. Talk about Haverford. What was it like when you --

WEISBERG: Wonderful place. Very, very -- I mean it was perfect for me. It was a big, beautiful, rural kind of feeling in the suburbs, but right next to a big city and on the eastern trunk line. So, I got into Philadelphia. You could go up to New York and there were very, very sharp kids. Plus, even though it was nominally all boys, we had girls around all the time because Bryn Mawr College was a mile away, and I even majored over there, because that was where the center of the Russian Department was located, which was a joint department. A good four years.

Q: Was --

WEISBERG: Played, played cricket there a couple years. And made --

Q: You were there from when to when?

WEISBERG: 1968 to 1972, which was a pretty lively time --

Q: I was about to say, what was the impact of the late '60s on --

WEISBERG: Well, yeah. I mean it was, it was -- well, you had -- because it was Quaker, I mean the whole orientation of the school was pacifist. So, it had a unanimous

opposition to the war. And this college was seen as a haven for draft resisters by the, the affluent, suburban community that surrounded it.

Q: Yeah. Well, what was the hand of Quakerism like at Haverford?

WEISBERG: Well, at the time there, I mean they had, they had Quaker meeting, which you didn't have to attend. My, my best friend and my roommate most of the time was a Quaker. So, I got a little bit more knowledgeable about it. And it was there -- I mean the whole philosophy of the school was very much to let other people live in peace and, and they should let you do the same thing. And total opposition to the war, as I said. Really on, on the right side of about every social issue in my view.

Q: Well, did the question ever come up of OK, let's say World War II. Should Hitler have taken over, should we have gotten involved or not? I mean is that --

WEISBERG: Well, I, I think that would always give a Quaker great pause. Actually, this friend of mine's grandmother had grown up partially in Nazi Germany in the 1930s, because her parents had been with the American Friends Service Committee over there trying to help people.

Q: It's --

WEISBERG: Better question posed to a Quaker than to me.

Q: OK (laughs). No, I was just wondering whether it was something that was debated much.

WEISBERG: All the time. Oh, sure. Oh yeah. But I mean not every -- not many of the kids were Quakers. But still, the overlaying philosophy and the atmosphere was war is really, really never acceptable.

Q: What were you picking up -- were you taking -- you're taking Russian, weren't you?

WEISBERG: I was.

Q: So, you just have gotten involved in studying Russian history and all that?

WEISBERG: Yes.

Q: How was the Soviet Union viewed there?

WEISBERG: Well, I had a first good look at it myself in 1969, because I went for three months to study Russian in what was then in Leningrad.

Q: What was your --

WEISBERG: Well, I'll tell you. I got back and I've always thought, even at 19, I wasn't a complete fool. My mother said, "What did you think of the place?" My mother asked.

"Well, I'll tell you one thing. The rest of my life I'll never be scared of them." The most inefficient place I've ever seen. And I was absolutely right. And when I went back 15 years later to serve with the Department of State, nothing changed (*laughs*).

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: I mean it was really the antithesis of anything that worked right. And as a 19-year-old, I -- I mean it was quite clear to me.

Q: Well, how did they treat you?

WEISBERG: Well, they treated us very well. I think the Soviets -- well, they treated us well within limits. The Soviet read on the student demonstrations back then was that there was an undercurrent among the American university students that would eventually culminate in a pro-communist atmosphere in the United States. And it shows you how little they knew about us. So, when you got over there, they thought well, we'll make you feel very welcome. We had free run of the city. You could talk to Russians. It was pretty -- but it was also 1969, so it was -- the atmosphere was not quite as poisoned as it was before and afterwards. That said, there were limits on what you could do. And if you crossed a line you could -- like a friend of mine put a blue ribbon on a Lenin poster and he was out of the country the next day.

Q: Yeah. How about when you ran into -- oh, they had a big drive around that period for getting African students. Were there many -- were you in --

WEISBERG: Russians -- Russians -- an awful lot of -- frequently -- well, in 1969 there weren't very many, but there were some. But I -- when you would see one on the street, the Russians would physically react. And almost invariably, in a conversation with a Russian at some point or another, they'd say, "Well, you like blacks?" They didn't like them. And when I went back in the 1980s, if anything it was worse.

Q: Yeah. No, they're really xenophobic. I remember --

WEISBERG: Xenophobic. They are downright racist. I mean not everybody, but it was, it was --

Q: Yeah, but call 'em black monkeys.

WEISBERG: They didn't like Asians too much either.

Q: No.

WEISBERG: They didn't like anyone too much sometimes (*laughs*).

Q: Were there attempts to propagandize you or --

WEISBERG: Well --

Q: -- brainwash you?

WEISBERG: -- looking back, I wouldn't say. I think it was subtler in the sense they were just giving us a, making us feel comfortable in the place.

Q: Mm.

WEISBERG: So, you'd think, "Well, this is -- wouldn't be such a bad system to live under." But if you got into discussions with some of the teachers or some of the Soviet students who were like our student assistants, dorm residents if you will, they then, then it would get a bit more charged.

Q: Well, at the -- at Haverford, were you taking this language -- Russian studies, was it?

WEISBERG: Mainly language, but also you had -- I mean I did Russian history and some other related class, political science. I took other things too. I took French, took a lot of English lit.

Q: During this time, did you have any contact or knowledge of the Foreign Service?

WEISBERG: No contact -- no. I mean I knew it was out there, but no.

Q: Yeah. Well then, you graduated in --

WEISBERG: 1975 -- I'm sorry, 1972 from Haverford.

Q: 1972. Then where?

WEISBERG: Went to law school at Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina.

Q: Why Chapel Hill?

WEISBERG: I'd been thinking about going to -- for a long time either -- I can't even imagine I was thinking about it either, Duke or UVA (University of Virginia). And our -- a friend of mine from Bryn Mawr said, "If you're going to go look at those two, why don't you go see Chapel Hill too? Knowing you, I think that's the one you're going to pick," and she was right and I did. So, I went.

Q: As you were taking law, did any particular field of law appeal to you?

WEISBERG: I was interested in taxes and domestic relations, but I think early on I didn't think I was going to practice. But I wanted to finish and get the degree. But I wasn't -- I wanted -- if anything, I would have been most interested in legal aid or public defender. But I, I didn't end up doing that.

Q: But I'm just wondering. By the time you were ready to go to college, I mean you graduated from college, and then to go take law school, which is three years or -- I mean this is three more years --

WEISBERG: Well, I had, I had a very low draft number. So most of the time I was in college I was looking down the barrel of going in or maybe even going to Vietnam. As it happened, I was able to get a deferment for, for a bad back, which has bothered me off and on, but probably all and all I could have served. But I'm fortunate I didn't have to, I'm not sorry I didn't. So, looking at going to more school didn't look all that bad.

Q: I see. OK, well --

WEISBERG: But I did some work then too. I -- the second -- the summer between my first and second year of law school, I went to Detroit and was an assembly line worker for Chrysler. Great experience. Remember, remember the UAW (United Auto Workers)?

Q: Oh yes. United Auto Workers.

WEISBERG: And completely got a lot out of that. Very interesting environment.

Q: Well, what were you doing there?

WEISBERG: Well, I was doing a lot of things. One job was making -- putting -- assembly 750 oil pumps a day, how to do that. And worked a lot of overtime, because these foremen revered education. And their position was well, we're going to make sure you get so much overtime that you'll go back to school, because we don't want you to stay in the plant. And -- which was -- but it was socially interesting. I mean it was, it looked as though there were going to be a big contract negotiation, possible strikes. I found my coworkers to have all kinds of areas of knowledge I never thought about. I remember one guy used to work, and old guy -- well, not that old -- and he'd give me hours, he'd be lecturing me about how the tax code ought to be revised. I mean I never even thought about it before. And years later I'm thinking, "Well, Mario, he was quite right."

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Lot of stuff like that. Always good. So, I did that for the summer. And then I came back for my second year in law school. Then the next summer I was clerk for the Tax Commissioner of Albany, New York. And then I came back my third year of law school and then graduated from Carolina in 1975. Took the bar in New York in 1975. Found I passed at the end of the year. But at the end, I didn't want to practice and decided

I wanted to get a job in an educational setting. Began -- went back to Philadelphia and talked to people up there. And the -- seemed to be some interest in getting a job in development fundraising, getting grants, writing proposals, things like that. So, I sent out lots and lots and lots of letters. Because I used to sit there all day and just type letters and resumes and send them all out. And eventually did get a job offer to work at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California. So, I went out there.

Q: Let me stop just a second here. Well, we're talking -- you're at North Carolina. How stood things in race relations there at the university?

WEISBERG: Well, the university was fine. In fact, Chapel Hill was I think the only city in the entire South that voted for George McGovern in 1972. That was the first time I voted too, that's right.

Q: But was North Carolina -- was it a different world?

WEISBERG: Well, Chapel Hill was in a different world, but once you got out of town things, things were different. But I, I think 1972, I mean it was a lot of difference in North Carolina, for example, as opposed to further south, Alabama, Mississippi. It was, it was better than that.

Q: Well, you went to Harvey Mudd?

WEISBERG: Worked out there for a year and a half as part of the Claremont Group as a development officer.

Q: That has an excellent reputation. How'd you find the area? That consortium?

WEISBERG: Well, it was -- oh, it was a great place to work. I loved living out in Los Angeles (L.A.) I mean it was great. All the good weather, playing tennis, going to baseball games. And all new friends. It was fine. I had --

Q: What were you teaching?

WEISBERG: First time I was ever in the West. I was working in fundraising and administration.

Q: Ah.

WEISBERG: And because I was only 25, I mean I was the same age not only that -- I was younger than the faculty and the same age as the students.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: And the consortium was -- I mean they were really good schools. Harvey Mudd was science and engineering, but right across the street was what then was

Claremont Men's. Now it's Claremont McKenna, Pomona, Pitzer, Scripps Graduate School. Lot of programs on campus. Lot to do outside. Good year and a half. Enjoyed it.

Q: Where'd you live, in --

WEISBERG: Lived in a place that's now called a little more elegantly Rancho Cucamonga.

Q: Uh-huh.

WEISBERG: That time it didn't have the Rancho, and it was at the -- sort of looked out at the mountains. I had a tiny above-garage apartment I rented from a man. I'd seen an ad for the princely summer of \$135 a month.

Q: Well, Cucamonga I remember because as a kid I listened to Jack Benny and always --

WEISBERG: Anaheim, Azusa, and Cucamonga.

Q: -- had jokes, Azusa and Cucamonga.

WEISBERG: That's right.

Q: (laughs)

WEISBERG: That's right.

Q: Well, do you have any stories about fundraising, about -- this has to be a pretty non-academic type business.

WEISBERG: Well, I mean there were a couple things about it. It was putting me in touch with all these very senior CEO's (chief executive officer) at a very young age and dealing with me kind of as, I mean as an equal. I mean the West being the West, I mean we were there to work on them as trustees and then hit up their counterparts for corporate gifts. But I did have -- I mean besides the fact that the vice president at the time, I learned a lot from him, but I did have one other experience that I have recounted many, many times. It's something I never forgot. One of the trustees was named Ken Julen and he would take me with him all and these other corporate captains. And we went one day to a company TRW (Thompson Ramo Wooldridge). They had an office in North Hollywood. And we got there and got up on the floors, lots of windows looking south. Later on, our host pointed out you could look down and see the grave of Marilyn Monroe. But we were coming to a vice president named Sid Webb. So, there was a receptionist, and a big open floor, and then the offices of the bigwigs were in the back. So, Ken Julen said, "I'm here to see Sid Webb, an old friend of mine, here to talk about Harvey Mudd College."

And the reception said, "Fine, I'll call back." And a few minutes later Sid Webb came out of his office, all the way out -- didn't have his secretary meet us. He came up to meet us to take us back to his office.

Well, they were old friends and I was -- but I thought, "That's very nice."

Month later I came out to see him. This time I was alone. Twenty-six years old, bottom of the ladder, and I told the receptionist who I was and I was coming to see Sid Webb. And she said, "Fine, I'll call him." And a few minutes later he did the same thing with me. I never forgot it, even when I was an ambassador. I never sent anybody to meet anybody. I went out to meet them myself.

Q: Yeah. No, and --

WEISBERG: Answered my own phone even when I was ambassador too.

Q: Yeah. Sure.

WEISBERG: And that never left me, as you can tell. I remember it quite clearly as it happened.

Q: Oh yeah. Did the money raising get involved in politics or anything like that?

WEISBERG: No. Well, there had been, there had been (*laughs*) -- it's funny you mentioned that. There had been a bit of a stir out there right before I got there because they had asked Angela Davis to be an adjunct member of the faculty.

Q: Oh my gosh, she was --

WEISBERG: Yeah, yeah.

Q: She was a --

WEISBERG: From the Soledad Brothers, right, right.

Q: -- involved in a prison break, I think.

WEISBERG: Soledad Brothers, that's right. So, there was some hell to pay about that. But that kind of quieted down by the time. And that wasn't Harvey Mudd's -- they weren't really in the eye of that hurricane. But what was good about it was years later when I came to the Foreign Service, I was an admin guy, and all the time you are writing to the Department of State asking for money. And it was second nature to me. So, the years I spent in development, I look back -- I mean I didn't always like it, but I was glad I'd done it.

Q: Yeah. Well, this is one of the, one of the great failings of the Foreign Service. It's not very good for asking for money.

WEISBERG: Well, that's right. But the post where I was assigned, we did all right, but we'll get to that I guess.

Q: Yeah (laughs). OK. Well then, at any point in this Harvey Mudd time, did the Foreign Service come across your radar?

WEISBERG: only time was the Ambassador from East Germany came to speak, and I remember going -- because I was always hooked on Eastern Europe.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: I always liked it there and I don't know why I liked it, I used to travel there and I remember, just interesting hearing this guy. But other than that, no. Not at all. What I was trying to do was get a job in sports and the entertainment industry. And I wasn't really pursuing it, but I was beginning to think about it. But didn't.

Q: So, what'd you do?

WEISBERG: Well, the next chapter was I got a call and I went for the next five years, again working in fundraising, for the medical school of Dartmouth College. So, I went all the way from Southern California to Northern New Hampshire.

Q: Good God, how'd you take the weather?

WEISBERG: *(laughs)* Oh, I was in shock. I had never seen winters like that in Hagerstown, I'll tell you *(laughs)*. But I got used to it.

Q: Well, how did you find Dartmouth?

WEISBERG: How'd I find Dartmouth?

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: That reminds me of the story, about how did the Beatles find the United States and John Lennon said, "Went to Greenland and we turned left."

Q: (laughs)

WEISBERG: As, as a place or how did I get there, or?

Q: As a place, I mean --

WEISBERG: Well, it was, it was -- I mean I used -- people asked me how I got that job. And I said, "They had an affirmative action program in the 1970s that they wanted a white guy who wasn't an alumnus."

Q: (laughs)

WEISBERG: And I was it.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: It was the kind of place where everyone you met would introduce himself and it was himself, because they had just started taking women there with numbers. So, I'm John Smith 1943 or I'm Bill Anderson 1956. I mean there were all these old Greeners. Everybody would quote the class that he was an alumnus of.

Q: Well, what I've gathered, it and Princeton have a very strong --

WEISBERG: That's right.

Q: -- alumni group.

WEISBERG: Yes, they do.

Q: My college, I've had very little to do with it.

WEISBERG: And Haverford is like -- it just doesn't engender that kind of feeling. But yeah, Dartmouth was like that. And I went up there. The medical school was in real trouble. It's an old school. It was founded back in 1798, I think. Not too long after the college itself. But it was not in good financial shape, and they wanted to do a big capital drive-- what seemed big, 25 million dollars at the time. Now, now it'd be pennies. So, I was there during that time for five years. Meantime, did -- eventually kind of got used to the weather. Also did some sports on the radio. Did that. Little bit on TV, mainly radio. A talk show and sports trivia. And I did, did some travel, went to Europe a few times, went back to Eastern Europe for a month in 1979 with a guy that I roomed with in Leningrad.

Q: Mm-hmm.

WEISBERG: Who was by then a professor. He was in Middlebury, now at a Colorado College. He'd gone to Haverford too. And I kind of drifted through. Played a lot of softball up there, played some hoops, played tennis. As always, drank a lot of beer. And always -- but wanted to get a job in sports or less, less so in the entertainment -- mainly sports. And nothing broke. I mean I'd, I'd have some interviews. Went down to New York a lot, wrote a lot of letters. Nothing came of it.

Q: So, I mean were you --

WEISBERG: I even went up to ESPN when they had a little office in Bristol, Connecticut nobody had heard of, and I didn't get anything from them.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Probably should have pressed that more, but I didn't.

Q: Well then, did you feel you were spinning your wheels or --

WEISBERG: Well, I knew I was -- I wanted to get out of -- what a great place to be. I mean was getting older, but the students weren't and I was ready for a change. So, I had pretty much decided by 1981 or 1982 that I wanted to leave.

Q: So, what happened?

WEISBERG: Well, before that, back in 1980 I used to play tennis with a guy. And he told me that -- he said, "You know, you really ought to take a Foreign Service test." He said, "I've failed it a couple times," but he said, "With your interest, you've got Russian, things like that," he said, "I think you'd do well on it. And it seems to favor somebody who's been working for a while." And I listened to him and I didn't really pay much attention. But I was -- as I was thinking of leaving Dartmouth, I was thinking one possibility, well maybe I ought to practice law, start using my degree. Even though I had a New York license, that didn't cut any ice in New Hampshire. Not much cuts any ice in New Hampshire (*laughs*), so I knew I'd have to take the bar again. Seven years out of law school I'd have to start doing it all. Studying at night while I was working. And then I thought, "Well, all right, I'll, I'll take the test, right."

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: OK, so I'm thinking I got to take the New Hampshire bar, and I thought well, all right, since I haven't taken any test other than a motorcycle test in seven years, I'll take the Foreign Service exam just to kind of get in a test mode. Which I did. So, I took it in the fall of 1980, which was interesting. It was right during the hostage crisis in Iran. And I think, thanks to that and "Nightline," more people took the Foreign Service test than ever before. I mean you would have thought the opposite.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Everybody went and thousands -- I think it was 16,000 people take it, and there were very few slots as it turned out. Because when Reagan came in, they put such a freeze on hiring. That was later. So, I took the written test. And to be honest with you, I had forgotten about it. And I said I was doing sports on a radio show. And the night before, we're having our Christmas party. And at about one in the morning, after a lot of drinking, my radio partner said, "Didn't you have some test you had to do tomorrow?"

I went, "Ah no." So, I came in a little bit under the weather. But I think with that I was probably much looser when I had taken it. I had all these very aggressive Dartmouth undergraduates who were much worried about it. And with me, I, you know, if I didn't -- I had a job, and I wasn't really looking to get in the Foreign Service. So, I took the written test and forgot about it, kept working at Dartmouth. And then about six months later in 1981, I got asked to take the oral exam in Boston. So, I went down and I took that. Still --

Q: What was your impression of the oral exam?

WEISBERG: Well, when I left, my college roommate met me at the New England Oyster House. He said, "How'd you go?"

And I said, "Well, I'll tell you one thing. I don't know what they're looking for, but it ain't me." Well, it was the -- I mean, you know, I, again, took it as kind of a, just an exercise to do something without any intention to come in. Although, like anybody else, you want to -- you never want to fail anything.

Q: No, no, you don't go to fail.

WEISBERG: What I remember was on the written part of it, because there was a written, they had this thing called inbox organizational skills. And the test was -- the hypothetical was, "Well, your college administrator has been away for a month and here's your inbox. Sort out everything." Well, that's what I was doing. That couldn't have been easier.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: I mean I was just like dealing cards with these memos. And then they had me meet with examiners and I had some question, one of them was, "Well, what manmade structures would you suggest the foreigners see in the United States?"

So, I went down the usual stuff. I said, "Well, the mall on Washington, World Trade Center," which was still up (*clears throat*) -- excuse me. I said, "Just been in St. Louis," so I said, "The Gateway Arch," three. And I got down to the fourth, the last one, and I couldn't think of anything. I said, "Well, Watchtowers." Well, neither examiners had ever heard of them. So, they asked what it was and I told them these structures made from old junk looked like ships in the ghetto. And, and they were -- I think that may have helped my --

Q: Yeah, yeah.

WEISBERG: -- pass it, because I think it was something that they never encountered.

Q: W-A-T-T-S.

WEISBERG: That's right. Then I -- but then I -- again, I forgot about that. A little later in the summer I got -- well, you passed that and take the physical and then I had a security check, some agent came up to New Hampshire and went over to Vermont, asked to talk to a few people. And then I put it out of my mind. I didn't hear anything for months and months and months.

Q: Were you married at the time?

WEISBERG: Nope. Nope. Increasingly disaffected with the foreign -- with Dartmouth. Really wanted to leave. And then I took the New Hampshire -- I took the bar exam in 1982 in, I think, it was February.

Q: Mm-hmm.

WEISBERG: What then transpired I always thought if it had been in different order, Lord knows how my life -- how things would have gone. I heard from the Foreign Service and they said, "Well, we offer you a job."

And I said, "Well, thank you very much, but," -- said, "Well, let me think about it."

And I thought about it for three days and I called her back and I said, "No, I -- no. Thank you."

And everybody I talked to, my friends, said, "You know, you really -- you sure you want to do that? You know, you're not happy here and why don't you just take the thing? You want to leave Dartmouth. You're not getting along with your boss."

And I called up my mother and my mother said, "Well, you were thinking of going out to California and blow off a couple years. Why don't you just do it at the Foreign Service for a couple years?" Said, "You'll only be 34, five anyway when you're done."

So, I said, "Well, OK."

So, I called them back and they said, "Yes, we still have a place for you."

So that job was set. I gave Dartmouth a notice. And a couple weeks after that -- I was going to be there for the rest of April. So early April I got a phone call from the NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) in Shawnee Mission, Kansas. And they said, "Would you like to come out for an interview?"

And I thought, "Aw, God damn it." Finally get a job offer in the sports world. And I thought about it and I thought about it. And I thought, "Well, at least go down and talk to them."

And again, my mother weighed in and she said, "Well, I don't think you ought to do that. Because you already accepted that job with the government. And if you pull out again,

you'll probably never get anything with them." This came from the 1950s mindset I think.

So, I said, "OK." So, with regret I told the NCAA no thank you, saying goodbye to that.

I got down the last day of April. Well, I guess it was around the 21st or 22nd. I was driving down to Washington to join the Foreign Service and I checked my mailbox one last time. There's this big thick envelope saying, "Congratulations, you passed the New Hampshire bar." So always wondered if it'd been a little bit different what would have happened. So, in April 1982, I came to Washington and joined a very small A100 (A class of incoming Foreign Service officers) class, 25.

Q: What was it like then? What were the people that --

WEISBERG: I liked it very much. I -- it was a small class, got to know everybody. I always felt very -- I liked all of my classmates. Never served with any of them, but I kept in touch with them as much as I could. I sat next to a fellow -- because it was alphabetical, I was the last chair at a table -- this is still over in Rosslyn, this wonderful campus wasn't even dreamed of at that time. And I was sitting next a guy named Peter Whaley, who is unfortunately no longer with us. Had a pretty colorful career himself. So, we sat down and after a couple minutes he said, "Well," he said, "You should know I had the highest scores of anybody on the Foreign Service test."

So, I said, "Well, I think that's why we're sitting next to one another."

And he said, "Oh really?" He said, "Your scores were high?"

And I said, "No, I had the lowest," (*laughs*).

Q: I was an Average Jim. I got something like a 69.7 or something.

WEISBERG: Oh yeah. Well, anyways, so that kind of set the relationship. So, it was a good class. It was 21 junior officers, four mid-levels, pretty varied. I was 31, just about 32, but I was at the average age, both sides. And off we went.

Q: How about minorities? Females and all?

WEISBERG: Well, there weren't many. That -- I think there were four women, two mid-levels, two -- no, I'm sorry. There were more. Wait a minute. Deborah and Michelle. Two of the mid-levels were women. And I think three or four -- now, I'm trying to think a minute. Have to think a minute back. One went to Buenos Aires. She went to Haiti. I think just three others. I'll have to go back -- if I think hard enough, I'll remember everybody in the class, but it was either 21 and four or 19 -- 19 and six or 20 and five, something like that. Not many. Minorities, we had an African American, real good guy. He'd been a Green Beret and he'd come back. And he had joined. And he'd been a

policeman for a while I think in New Mexico. Thinking that might have been it. This is pre-Palmer. New Foreign Service Act, the pre-Palmer.

Q: Well then, how'd you find the training?

WEISBERG: Well, A100 is wonderful. I mean everything was so new and I enjoyed the classmates and it's pretty relaxed and didn't have any -- weren't getting graded or evaluated, and every day having very good speakers. I quite enjoyed it. If there was a downside to it, it was that the assignments we were looking at to my mind were *nothing* like what I wanted to do. I mean I wanted to go to Eastern Europe or something like that, and these places were -- in fact, the first day, the second after we got sworn in, they gave us a list of places and I hadn't heard of the cities. And I thought I knew something about geography. I hadn't heard of the languages in some cases. And finally, I raised my hand. I said, "Where are these places?" And then they finally told us the countries and I noticed none of my classmates had been willing to admit his or her ignorance. But I wasn't the only one that didn't know.

Q: When you came in with your background, were you put into the administrative cone, or was it --

WEISBERG: Well, you came in, you were designated by cone. So, I -- I mean that was what I accepted. To tell you the truth, I didn't -- at that time was unaware of the class structure of the cones. Wasn't aware that when you're in the admin cone, as Frank Deford characterized Pete Carril, "You're a blue-collar guy in a button-down league."

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: I mean I was really at the bottom of the order down there, but I didn't know it. I just took it -- to me it was a job in the Foreign Service.

Q: It was a job, yeah.

WEISBERG: Yeah.

Q: Well then, where'd you go? Your first job?

WEISBERG: Well, it was, it was Bombay, as it was then called. But I didn't get there right away. The -- I was supposed to go in December. To get off language probation they said, "We'll give you three months of Russian," but I actually got off language probation at about six weeks, so that was done. Then I went to all these other courses, which was good, because I did the GSO course, I did the admin course, which at that time were three weeks each and quite soft. Years later they were much more detailed and longer, so I avoided all that. Did ConGen (the consular training course) laws, did area studies. I mean I was ready to get a graduate degree at FSI (Foreign Service Institute)

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: I hadn't even been out of the country yet. And then in December of 1982 I went off to India as a consular officer.

Q: And you were there from when to when?

WEISBERG: December 10th, 1982 until about June 10th, 1984.

Q: First place, how were American-Indian relations in that period?

WEISBERG: Officially poor. Personally excellent.

Q: What was going on?

WEISBERG: Well, this is -- Mrs. Gandhi is still running the show. And she had come to the United States in 1982 and met with President Reagan, so things may have been a little bit better. And the Ambassador was Harry Barnes, who just died, who started his career in Bombay.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: And he was, he was quite interested in getting relations to improve. And personally they were good. But this was still the protectionist India, had not opened up all the trade lanes. That happened later.

Q: What was your job?

WEISBERG: Consular officer. Start off with nonimmigrant visas, moved over to immigrant visas, finished with _____.

Q: What was consular work like at the time?

WEISBERG: Well, I thought it was great. After all those years asking for money, I thought it was nice, people coming to me asking me for something.

Q: Yeah (laughs).

WEISBERG: So, I didn't mind telling all these Indians whether they could go to the United States and telling them no. Didn't bother me in the least. And the -- I mean I'd -- just to say, I'd been unhappy at Dartmouth, so it was, it was -- the whole job was new and fun and I had a wonderful boss, very colorful woman named Nancy Pelletreau, who was head of the section. She was great. And really encouraged you to be creative, kind of have fun on the job. Wasn't a micromanager at all. The CG (consul general) was one of these old-style Foreign Service elitist guys named Bruce Amstutz, kind of (*laughs*) -- I remember that.

Q: How was --

WEISBERG: But Nancy was good and the people I worked with were good.

Q: How'd you find -- Indians and Americans both seem to, in a lot of circumstances, seem to lecture each other. How did you find --

WEISBERG: Well, I think that's a good way to put it. But it's the most hospitable society on the face of the earth. And what I would find is I'd constantly meet Indians and they'd say, "Well, why are you supporting Pakistan? Why are you doing this? Why are you doing that?" And look at the watch and say, you know, "I've got to run, but why don't you come over to my house for dinner tonight so we can continue it." I mean it was a party every night. Got invited into so many homes, which I think you would agree is certainly a measure of how successful and enjoyable a tour is.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: And we've really been friends for life. I mean I'm still -- I go to Bombay to this day, and I'm constantly seeing friends from that period. I met a whole bunch of Indians my age and I was still single and it was wonderful.

Q: How about Bollywood, did you --

WEISBERG: I, I -- actually one of my closest friends is a very well-known actress down there. She's not the typical Bollywood actress though. She was known a little bit in the West, because she had been in the film "Siddhartha" when she was very young. But I met her over a visa --

Q: Mm-hmm.

WEISBERG: -- question. She had come in, she was taking a group here to New Hampshire to do some filming. And it turned out we were neighbors and she and her sister have stayed friends -- just saw them a few months ago.

Q: Well, did --

WEISBERG: But it was not as -- it had -- it had been on the cover of Time Magazine that summer, another actress, so it was beginning to, to get in the world's consciousness. Not like today.

Q: Yeah. How'd you find Bollywood movies?

WEISBERG: Well -- well, fun to laugh at. But they're, there's some other very good filmmakers out there. There's a whole other side of the industry. They're much more very reflective, interesting films.

Q: Yeah, I -- you know, I think of the -- back when I was a young sprout we had all these Bengali movies that were -- can't think of the man's name, but --

WEISBERG: Satyajit Ray.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: And he was -- I mean he --

Q: Yeah, it was --

WEISBERG: Very, very different kind of filmmaker, yeah.

Q: But you know, the other ones somehow, you know, as the plot develops in a Bollywood all of a sudden everyone jumps up and starts singing. And up to a point I'll take that, but --

WEISBERG: *(chuckles)* Different, different art form.

Q: But --

WEISBERG: But I enjoyed it. It was an interesting -- got to travel around the country a little bit and really made a lot of friends, played a lot of tennis there and --

Q: What were the politics of the area?

WEISBERG: Well, the -- I mean India was aligned, sort of said it was not aligned, voted with the Soviet Union a lot in the United Nations (UN). I mean there was a lot of criticism of the United States, but on the other hand a lot of visa pressure. They had a bit of a paradox.

Q: Well, I always kind of wondered --

WEISBERG: And the press was pretty negative, pretty down on the United States.

Q: Gandhi, you know, the Great Russian Brotherhood, you know the Russians didn't like him and really didn't have a hell of a lot to offer him, except some probably second-rate military hardware.

WEISBERG: Well, I thought -- I think -- as my wife often said, "The biggest thing was supporting Pakistan." She said -- she always said, "The day the U.S. says we're breaking with Pakistan, everything's going to be fine in India."

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Now, a lot of that's been surmounted by the changes in the commercial relationship.

Q: Yeah. Were you noting the beginning of changes, or not, or?

WEISBERG: No. No. No.

Q: There wasn't really much in the way of developing India's --

WEISBERG: Well, internally. I mean they made everything. You could get everything there. But it hadn't turned -- I mean -- well, I mean there was no U.S. investment. Coca-Cola had been thrown out, IBM had gone, Pan Am had two people. I mean it was, it was pretty, pretty, pretty low key. You could get Tabasco sauce. That was the one U.S. product you could find. But even that they copied.

Q: Well, how about Indian students? Were they coming down and demonstrating a lot, or?

WEISBERG: No, they were all coming in for visas.

Q: (laughs)

WEISBERG: *(laughs)* They were the last ones to demonstrate. They didn't want to have a picture taken outside the consulate because they were all hitting us for visas.

Q: Well --

WEISBERG: I mean it was, it just wasn't that kind of an environment. It was more like a sort of intellectual dueling, not demos or anything like that.

Q: You mentioned your consul general was an old-liner. What was he like?

WEISBERG: Well, he was -- I mean he was remote. I mean one of the things about it that I noticed, like *nobody* ever said, "Got all these good contacts, why don't you do reporting besides consular?" Neither he nor anybody else.

And I thought to myself later on when I was in more of a mentoring thing, I said, you know, "You got to get outside your cone. The key is do stuff outside what you've been sent to do to get the whole experience." And I remember that. And he, he didn't have anything to do with anybody, at least not with me. I mean I was a junior officer. Except, as it happened, there was a long strike at the tennis club and he knew I was a tennis player. So, then he asked me to come play doubles with him a couple times, because there wasn't any guest fee and they needed a fourth. Through that I made a lot of other friends.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: I mean, I think he was an OK guy, but I don't think he took any interest in what the junior officers were -- at least not what I was doing. I don't know about the others.

Q: Were you there from 1980 --

WEISBERG: End of 1982 until the middle of 1984.

Q: 1984. How about -- did the Soviets -- Soviets had still been around. Did they have a presence there?

WEISBERG: Huge, big, big consulate. Lot bigger than ours. They had a big trade mission. They were around. They were there.

Q: Did you get any feel for how they were doing, or?

WEISBERG: Well, I mean -- they had all these outward shows of solidarity. But then I went to a lot of parties there, I never saw anybody.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: So, I think they were pretty withdrawn. But the one thing about my tour down there was, it was really the best thing that ever happened to me, I met my wife. And she was working at the consulate. She actually was the last appointment of the Carter administration. She started January 19th, 1981.

Q: Oh God.

WEISBERG: Because the consulate hired her, and I met her two years -- let's see -- almost two years later when I came. And she --

Q: What's her background?

WEISBERG: She is -- well, she grew up in India, but she's ethnically a Persian because Zoroastrian. So, there was an exodus to flee Iran many, many centuries ago when her families came in. But she had grown up in Bombay.

Q: What was the Zoroastrian community -- what was their position in India -- well, in Bombay?

WEISBERG: Not unlike the Quakers in the United States. Very small. Quite successful in commercial ventures. J.R.D Tata, founder of Air India is a Parsi. Zubin Mehta, the conductor is. And also they are known for philanthropy, all the schools, hospitals. Quite, quite positively thought of. Community a little bit apart. Not very many, we only have 70,000 globally now. The Hindus and the Muslims, the other Indians sometimes think the

Parsis are really nice, very honest, little bit crazy. I keep telling my wife, I remind her of that.

Q: (laughs) Well, you mentioned social life. You were always -- you were able --

WEISBERG: Out all the time. All the time. I was lucky. I just met quite a few Indians. They were all about my age. And there was a famous cartoonist named Mario Miranda, and I met him at a Christmas party. I'd only been there two weeks. And he right away took me under his wing and said, "You know, I'm going to really get you out." And he was always having parties at his house, constantly called, let's go here, let's go there. And through him, I met a lot of the newspaper guys, a lot of the intelligentsia. That was, that was also very fortunate.

Q: The intelligentsia, I think of other countries, the chattering class and the Americans and Indians lecturing each other. How'd you find the newspaper people?

WEISBERG: Well, they were always kind of pushing. One guy was always trying to see if he could out a CIA guy. And I had a lot of friends who were the children of military families. So, because I was seeing them, there was a suspicion that I might not be just a consular officer.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: But I liked him. But you had to be on -- I mean they -- I mean on your guard in the sense that you had to go a little bit further than off the record. I mean you had to be aware these guys still might publish it. And, and they were, they were really probing. I mean they were critical of quite a few things the United States was doing. One good effect was that you had -- I mean it caused me to really be as up to date as I could in all that was going on here. Because they were smart. They followed stuff. And this is before the internet, so it's a little bit harder to keep up with stuff. And I did.

Q: Well, you were there -- let's see, I'm trying to think --

WEISBERG: End of 1982 to the middle of 1984.

Q: 1984. That would be -- what was happening then?

WEISBERG: Well, let's see. The United States, we lost the Marines in Beirut. We invaded Grenada. The -- it was -- Reagan's first Administration, so you had pretty extreme anti-Soviet language. The Korean plane was shot down.

Q: Yeah, and we had --

WEISBERG: I mean it was a time of --

Q: And we were very much involved in Central America.

WEISBERG: That's right. We were involved there and the Soviets were in Afghanistan.

Q: Mm-hmm. How did Afghanistan play down in Bombay, or did it?

WEISBERG: Well, I mean we would see some refugees coming to the consulate for visas. We also had a lot of Iranians come ask for visas. Because we were now one of the closest places for them to apply.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Since we were out of Tehran. But the thing about Afghanistan, I mean it was, it was interesting because Mrs. Gandhi and the Indians were probably a little bit too quiet on that. I mean it was a lot of saying well, you know, really, if you feel so strongly about the United States and Vietnam and everything else, why are you not more critical of your, your Soviet counterparts?

Q: It's a talking point.

WEISBERG: I never, I never felt the answers were satisfactory. But then I wasn't a political officer and I wasn't really at those levels.

Q: Right. Well, after that -- did you get married while you were there?

WEISBERG: Right at the end.

Q: Right at the end. That was a joyous way. How did her family feel about her --

WEISBERG: They were OK with it. A lot better than mine.

Q: How'd your family feel?

WEISBERG: They didn't like it. My parents -- everybody else was OK. My parents were not too wild about -- it took some time.

Q: It usually does.

WEISBERG: It usually does.

Q: Yep. Well then, where were you pointed towards after you left Bombay?

WEISBERG: Moscow.

Q: At last, huh?

WEISBERG: Well, I'd visited before. I hadn't been there in 15 years.

Q: What --

WEISBERG: I went there as a baby GSO (general services officer). Lowest of the low.

Q: What was the situation when you got -- I mean I can't remember, Sergeant Lonetree, had this happened?

WEISBERG: That came later, but that's during my time.

Q: Uh-huh. Well when you got there, who was the Ambassador?

WEISBERG: Really, one of the greatest -- to me still, the finest Ambassador I ever saw. Arthur Hartman.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: In fact, if you ever want to do an oral history, his is the one to do.

Q: I've done one with him. He didn't like it. He said it, but sort of sitting there -- but I hope at some time I can get him to --

WEISBERG: Most interesting career anybody ever had.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: Yes. Anyway, no, I'm still very close to him. He's the godfather of our son. Anyway, he was the Ambassador. My wife and I drove there, got there in August of 1984. Relationship was really in a trench. It was only 10 months after the plane had been shot down. We're barely talking to them. It was so bad.

Q: This was the plane that was shot down over Kamchatka.

WEISBERG: Korean plane had been shot down. There was the SDI (Strategic Defense Initiative) Star Wars controversy. There was Afghanistan. It was just one thing after another. Very, very hostile atmosphere.

Q: Well, let's talk about your job first and --

WEISBERG: *(laughs)* I like talking about that.

Q: Huh?

WEISBERG: I went from, from king to garbage over night. You know, vice consul in India, you're like two ranks --

Q: Sure.

WEISBERG: -- two ranks over God. Baby GSO in Moscow, you, you're better off being on a chain gain in Mississippi. I never, never was yelled at and treated that way by -- it was *incredible* the way the American community took shots at you being a GSO. It's amazing. I actually shut off. I didn't want to talk to anybody. And I used to go home in this tiny apartment my wife and I had and I'd put on these Clint Eastwood movies and I'd tell her, "Just stay away from me for an hour." Disgraceful.

Q: Was there something endemic about it or what?

WEISBERG: Well, no. I mean for these guys coming out to the Soviet Union, pretty bad housing, not a fun place. And particularly -- I mean everybody -- I wouldn't single out any other agency. And I kept telling them, I said, "You're not in Kansas anymore." I mean this is hard to get this stuff done. We're in a city -- I mean what I would have given for a True Value Hardware Store or something. And the cars didn't work and this didn't work and that. And it was just awful. And the philosophy of the admin counselor on down was, "Well, you just got to roll with it and we don't want anybody to fight back here. We're not," -- and I thought well, this, this is terrible. I mean I'm an educated person, I'm a Foreign Service Officer. I was treated really -- but I always learned from everything. I certainly never was like that.

Q: Who was the admin officer?

WEISBERG: Joe Hulings.

Q: The DCM?

WEISBERG: Curt Kamman. And then Dick Holmes.

Q: Yeah. Well, did you see any improvement over time?

WEISBERG: Second year, things got better.

Q: Huh?

WEISBERG: I'll tell you why. The new admin counselor was a guy named David Biel. And the SGSO (senior general services officer) who came in, was Jane Becker. And they were much tougher. And they made me feel more sense of value to what I was doing. But also, my work was such that I, I was able to stay with the American community more. I was doing renovations to the apartments and a lot of external stuff, and I'll get to it in our next session. And did a little reporting too. But I -- the less contact I had with the Americans, we have more Russian friends, more contacts. Got -- I wouldn't say I enjoyed it there, but it, it definitely got more livable.

Q: Well, how about -- I mean you're saying, you know, you didn't have a True Value Hardware Store. But how about the Soviet workmen? You had --

WEISBERG: Well, I was OK -- no, I was OK with them. I mean I -- I mean they were --- I mean basically they were workers. They were carpenters, carpet layers, I mean drivers - - I mean these guys I don't think were quite the espionage crew they were made out to be. One day I did say to the Ambassador's driver, I said, "You know, Serge," I said, "the Western press characterizes you as a KGB (Soviet Committee for State Security) colonel."

And he said, "Now Rob, do you think for the Ambassador we'd have at least a general?"

Q: (laughs)

WEISBERG: I mean I had fun with them. I mean I, I mean what was I going to do? I mean my job was to keep the cars running, get the apartments renovated, get the carpets laid. I mean and, and no one was going to send out some of my foreign counterparts from the UAW (United Auto Workers) to fix the car. So, you have to work with -- but I, I enjoyed them. I mean --

Q: Did --

WEISBERG: But I never asked them to do anything I wouldn't do. If they had to work overtime late at night to do an apartment, I stayed out and went there with them. And they knew that and they recognized it.

Q: How's your Russian?

WEISBERG: It got better and better. It got better on the street.

Q: Were you able to -- let me know when you --

WEISBERG: Yeah, maybe I'll leave you one -- maybe finish with one anecdote.

Q: OK.

WEISBERG: It'll be a good segue. I got there, I had the motor pool, the carpet layers, the charwomen. I mean real glamorous foreign affairs stuff. I mean I remember thinking, "What the hell does this have to do with the Foreign Service?"

And they said, "Well, with the motor pool you've got snow clearing." So, this was August, September, it's getting chilly. But I didn't really register on that. Well, a couple months later -- actually my wife went home to India for a few weeks. Had this big snowfall. And the embassy like snowed in, right? So, you got -- and all of our work on the outside came from the group called UPDK, the diplomatic services branch of the Soviet Foreign Ministry.

They kind of showed up half-heartedly with a few bulldozers, pushed some snow around. And then after that immediately disappeared. And I thought, "This is super. Now what am I going to do?" So, I went out in the street, took a couple bottles of vodka and a couple cartons of cigarettes. And I said, "Look, maybe we can encourage a little bit more -- a little longer work to get the job done." And immediately, all the equipment sprang into life. And I learned what the system was. Well, they had this huge snowfall that winter. Every damn day we're getting blasted. So, I would get up about five in the morning with one of our drivers and go around the city. This is all my own money. I know, great ethics stuff. But I mean I'd -- buying vodka and cigarettes and going out and where I found a snowplow or -- they had all kinds of equipment. I wish we had it here in the District of Columbia (D.C.) I'd make deals with these guys to come handle the U.S. Embassy. Well, actually after a few days it was all over the city where you could get this extra payment. And the embassy looked great. I mean every day all the snow was cleared, parking lot looked great. Meanwhile, the Foreign Ministry was snowed in.

Q: (laughs)

WEISBERG: And I was even by the second year getting calls from these Soviet apartment buildings that were calling me saying, "We understand you are the, you're the head of snow cleaning in the city. Can you send something out?"

Also had the help of a fabulously -- we had a big Seabee detachment working on the new embassy. And they're -- the youngest Seabee was this great guy. And he had driven a snowplow off of Newbury Port, Massachusetts. So, he got on a John Deere tractor and he, he was a genius. I mean the Soviets really were quite -- I mean the way he would do it, we had him, we had all this Soviet equipment. So, things were OK. Until *(laughs)* one day when the Soviet ministry had all this snow. They sent up some woman who was a brigadier in charge of these guys. And she comes up and sees *all* these guys working up at the embassy. And she asked me, "What's going on?"

And I said, "Well, I don't understand Russian, so I have to get somebody to translate."

So, she's screaming and screaming. And, "I know he's bribing these guys," and everything like that. And she even saw me giving vodka to a driver.

And I kept saying, "Well, I," -- to the interpreter, the dispatcher, -- "Just tell her I don't understand."

And she said in Russian, "On prekrasno ponimayet," "he perfectly well understands" *(laughs)*. And I understood that, started laughing. So that blew that cover.

Q: Yeah.

WEISBERG: But anyway, that was a -- there was -- the good thing was it kept me away from the Americans. Nobody was yelling at me. Everybody was quite impressed by this

miracle, and I was doing it. And it was fun. And my Russian got better, got out in the city. And as I say, I'm -- I always thought I was one of the founders of the Perestroika, that Gorbachev introduced a couple years later.

Q: Yeah. Well, did --

WEISBERG: *(laughs)* And also, in a service that has so many awards, would you believe my first 12 years in the Foreign Service, the *only* award I ever got was a step increase for that. Never got anything else.

Q: Well, I came in --

WEISBERG: Everybody else did, but.

Q: I don't know. You know, I notice -- I look at the Foreign Service list sometimes. People who get these awards and all. In my era, nobody got it. You know, we just didn't have 'em.

WEISBERG: I remember one of, one of the least common officers I ever worked with, his wall, would wallpaper these things. I came in, I was memorized, and when I said, you know, I said, "I hope you don't expect to get one here." I mean, I said, "Besides that, I don't think you have room for it."

Q: Yeah. Well --

WEISBERG: *(laughs)*

Q: -- did you have much of a chance to -- or maybe we should pick this up later. Want to finish with Russia now, or not?

WEISBERG: WE can do that.

Q: We can do that. How about reporting? I mean one of the things I understand that many of the officers found was to go to these sort of improvement lectures that they had or, you know, there were these lectures anybody could attend on various subjects.

WEISBERG: About the Soviets?

Q: About the Soviets.

WEISBERG: Oh, I didn't do any of that. I didn't do -- my wife was working in consular section. She got a, she got a, a PIT (part-time/intermittent/temporary employee) job there. And she was close to some of these dissidents and the Ambassador was working with that and there were feuds next to the guys who couldn't get exit visas. And the divided families where one spouse was an American and the Soviets wouldn't let the Soviet out. So, we met them and we met a few other people. We, through another colleague at the

embassy, who just died unfortunately, met a lot of the artists and the painters, the musicians. So, our life, I mean it got more interesting. I mean we started to, to get in on some Russian homes, got a bit about the city. And it never was a vacation spot, but second year -- I actually extended for a few more months. There for almost two and a half years. And quite -- got to feel pretty OK. Did a lot of traveling in Europe, which was a first for my wife.

Q: How did your wife find Russia?

WEISBERG: Well, she managed pretty well. She's, she's an adaptable sort. And even though the Russians have some strange views on people who don't look like them, they're OK with Indians. And they knew a lot about India and they knew the film industry, they knew the music. But she just had a knack of getting along with everybody, so the Soviets in the embassy and outside liked her. That was OK.

Q: So, we'll finish this up next time. Where did you go?

WEISBERG: Well, there's more on the Moscow thing. Maybe we'll pick this up with the second year, because we did more with the Ambassador.

Q: OK, we'll pick this up your second year in --

WEISBERG: Moscow, that's right. Because it was definitely different -- the second year was quite different than the first.

Q: I put it at the end, so we know where to pick it up. OK, great.

WEISBERG: We have nine more tours?

Q: Huh?

WEISBERG: I got nine more tours. That's --

End of interview