

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

**AMBASSADOR MELISSA FOELSCH WELLS**

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy*

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[Note: this interview was not edited by Ambassador Melissa Wells.]

*Q: When and where were you born and tell me about your parents and the background.*

WELLS: All right. I was born in Estonia when it was an independent country. I was born on November 18, 1932. My father's family had been living there for centuries, originally coming from Germany.

*Q: They put the Teutonic Knights out there to*

WELLS: Not quite that late. I think my forbearers let them go get all this bloody stuff done and then they came and they were commercial people.

*Q: You were the carpetbaggers that came in afterwards.*

WELLS: Yeah, because I did my last assignment in Estonia I had a chance to do a lot of research on my family. Then on my mother's side, while she herself was not born there, her father and grandfather and his grandfather so forth for centuries had also been born in Estonia, but of Swedish origin, going back to the days of Charles XII.

*Q: What was her family name?*

WELLS: Korjus.

*Q: Now, let's talk a bit first about your father. What was his background, education, work and then we'll do your mother.*

WELLS: He had a PhD in theoretical physics from a German university, Augsburg. He had two masters' degrees in mathematics and applied physics. He was a scientist.

*Q: And your mother?*

WELLS: My mother was a singer, had a gorgeous voice. In fact, the reason we came to the United States was her voice. The great movie mogul called Irving Thalberg, you may have heard of him, I didn't believe this when my parents would tell the story, I thought, "Oh, no, there they go again" until I read it in a book by Rudolf Bing, *A Thousand and*

*One Nights at the Opera.* Bing, at that point in the 1930s, he was Metro Goldwyn Mayer's agent in New York and Bing wrote in his book, takes up a couple of pages on this story, he said "I got a call from Irving Thalberg saying 'You must have heard of Miliza Korjus'" because my mother was singing at the Berliner Staatsoper at that time. We had moved to Berlin. Berlin was the capital of classical music in the 1930s. And he said, "I want her to come to Hollywood and make films. I need this voice." So [BING] said, "Of course, I know, I know who she is. Wouldn't you like me to send a photograph of her?" "No, I don't care what she looks like. Elizabeth Arden will take care of everything."

*Q: Elizabeth Arden being the makeup lady.*

WELLS: Yeah. "I want the voice!" Well little did they know they had something very wonderful to work with. My mother was gorgeous. So, we left Berlin in 1936 and settled in Southern California, in Hollywood. Took her two years to learn to speak English. She didn't have a word of English, and to drop 40 pounds, and then they made the film, *The Great Waltz*, it was called, it came out in 1938. It was nominated for an Academy Award. She was nominated for an Academy Award. They don't give Academy Awards for singing, this was as best supporting actress. Luise Rainer was in the film. It's the story; it's not really an accurate biography of Johann Strauss's life. It's just an excuse to play some beautiful music. So, I grew up in that milieu.

*Q: As a kid, I'm four years older than you and I grew up in southern California and I saw all the movies. Did she play a blonde in this thing? If I recall, I'm talking about 60 years ago or more, of course the lighting was so beautiful in those days. If a woman was beautiful, they really made it, boy oh boy I remember that.*

WELLS: Well the scene everyone remembers, the clip was used in *That's Entertainment!* the potpourri of musical scenes, is how the song *Tale of the Vienna Woods* was supposedly put together. What everybody remembers is my mother singing in a carriage going through the Vienna Woods, swinging her hat.

*Q: You got there in 1938*

WELLS: 1936, we got to the States.

*Q: You were just a kid, so where did you live, in Beverly Hills or Hollywood or where?*

WELLS: We first, we lived for a while in Beverly Hills and then we moved to Pacific Palisades, had a house there.

*Q: Let's talk a bit about where you went to school? I'm talking about elementary school.*

WELLS: Elementary school? Well I started school, a very posh little school called the Brentwood Town and Country School and I had three years there, up through the third grade. Then my mother was working on another film, a wonderful film it was going to

be, it was to be called *Guns and Fiddles*. The actor, they already had the shooting script and they had recorded the sound track and all that, and she was in a terrible automobile accident. They almost had to amputate her left leg. And that sort of put a halt to the career, for a while anyway. She was in hospital and casts and wheelchairs and crutches. And she had a chance to do a series of personal appearances in Mexico, and then go to Cuba, and supposedly down to Rio and Buenos Aires as well. And she took that, because she said, "I'll get my confidence back." She was dancing and whirling and here she has to come out with a cane on stage. It wasn't until I grew up and was an adult myself that I realized what this must have meant to my mother. So, we went to Mexico, she did that, she had a series of radio contracts and she had an offer to make a film down there. The war started and she decided, she just fell in love with Mexico and she wanted to stay in Mexico for the time being. So, I ended up going to school in Mexico for about four years. I had the fourth grade, fifth grade, through the seventh grade. I lost my English because I spoke German with my mother and Spanish with my friends and yes, we had English lessons in school, "The house had four windows" and that kind of thing but it was a little awkward when I came back to the States and joined up in the tail end of the seventh grade, really, in New York this time. It took me a little while to

*Q: What was your father doing?*

WELLS: My father, at first when we came over, he was completely occupied with my mother's career. She never was much of a businesswoman and so forth. He did the contracts, all the management thereof. And then later, with his background in theoretical physics, the aircraft industry was just beginning in southern California, he worked at some of the top places.

*Q: Now can you recall any, while you were at the Brentwood School, recall what it was like?*

WELLS: Oh, Jane Fonda. I was an upperclassman. I was in the third grade and she was either in, I think she was in kindergarten. I've seen that occasionally mentioned, 'cause movie actresses don't like to mention their years too often. But I remember her because her father was famous. I remember Robert Young's daughter. We were not great friends but I remember her. It was a small school, I have very vivid and very good memories of it, yes.

*Q: I was wondering whether you felt part of the, your family all part of the movie industry which of course at that time it was really an industry?*

WELLS: Oh yes, oh yes, there were movie stars living all around. I remember we used to crawl under the fence and go into Joan Crawford's back yard and play there and run away in case anybody, we never saw her. Yes, my mother had friends. Robert Taylor, because he was going to be her leading man in the new film, Hedy Lamar, Franchot Tone.

*Q: Well down in Mexico, you were there from what*

WELLS: From the age of, from about 1941 we went down, the summer of 1941, right after I finished school, came back at the end or the beginning of 1945.

*Q: How was school there? How'd you find sort of the educational, social life there as a young girl?*

WELLS: Well, this might come as a bit of a shock to you. In Mexico there was no compulsory education in those days and we lived quite a way outside of town in a beautiful home. I've been back since then; it's not outside of town anymore but right on the edge of town. I went to school, and my mother would give concerts and go traveling, and there was no way that she was going to leave me behind. So, I would disappear. I've always been tall and say for an eight, nine-year-old tall, and I had very blonde hair in those days. She used to take me with her and the teachers didn't seem to mind. I'd bring them back presents or something. I'd be gone for weeks on end because she would do tours. Of course, everywhere she went she was feted and she was interested in going to museums and things. I was the one who always wanted to go to the museum and I must say my mother was wonderful, even though I hardly ever went to school I had read Prescott's *Conquest of Peru* by the age of nine. It was not usually a nine-year old's reading material. In English, that sort of kept up my English, even though I wasn't speaking it, but I made good friends there. But when we came back to the States in 1945, and then she was going on concert tours, because my mother had a very unusual upbringing. She was born in Warsaw, because her father was a colonel in the Russian tsar's army, and he was posted there. Then they were posted in Moscow. When they were in Moscow World War I started and then the Revolution started. "Father's away fighting" her mother said, "This is too much confusion. I'm taking five girls to Kiev," where she had friends "and wait 'til all this settles down." They got entrapped in the Ukraine and her schooling was very, very sketchy, very sketchy. It was never very clear whether there was a system set up, with the chaos of the Revolution that was just the period she was there. There was the famine in the Ukraine. It was only towards the end of her life that she talked about her own childhood. But it was very clear to me early on that she didn't have much formal schooling, and it bothered her because she couldn't spell correctly and so forth. She would write to me but she would mix three languages up: Spanish, English, German and so forth, these were all misspelled but precious little of it. But she never was very strong on my being educated. My father, on the other hand, of course with his PhD, "She can be anything she wants. She's gonna be the new Lise Meitner." Lise Meitner in those days was known as a woman physicist. And I was torn between the theater, the arts and science.

*Q: How about at home? Would events of the day, when you were young, before you were a teenager, was there conversation around the dinner table and all or everybody sort of*

WELLS: Well, in Mexico my father was gone for long periods of time, back in the States, he came back to the States. Very odd, I don't even remember dinner conversations. Certainly, we ate, we must have eaten. It was not at all like a structured family life.

*Q: Brothers, sisters?*

WELLS: Two brothers that came later. Because the marriage was then breaking up, I had one brother born when I was 11 and another when I was 14 and the divorce came shortly after that.

*Q: So, these were, so you didn't grow up with brothers and sisters?*

WELLS: No.

*Q: You came back to, well first place, on these tours, you were dragging your mother around to all the museums?*

WELLS: See, otherwise we always, we traveled with a manager, someone, a very good friend, someone that she trusted me to go out with and be taken to the museums. They always laid out programs for her. To this day I know the geography of Mexico better than that of the United States. I can recite every single state in Mexico. Can't do that with the U.S.

*Q: Go to all the opera houses?*

WELLS: Yes, all these wonderful buildings. Even as young as I was, it was the *belle epoque*, the Porfiro Diaz era. And of course, we traveled everywhere by train and she'd have her compartment and we'd sit in the back and watch the countryside go by. She refused to take the plane.

*Q: Well, when you came back,*

WELLS: Well when we came back to New York, of course, yes, I started school, it was a Catholic school, two blocks from where I, I was not a Catholic but she said, "You go there. You tell 'em you're a Catholic" 'cause she didn't want me roaming around New York City by myself, taking buses and things. And then she had a heavy schedule of concerts and we just started the same game all over again. I'd come back to school and "Nice to see you again. Where've you been?" "Oh, we went to Cincinnati and then we went to Cleveland and then we took the train all the way over to Vancouver and Victoria." They never said anything to me but I guess somebody from the Board of Education went to see my mother because I came home from school and she said, "We have to have a talk. A woman came to see me today and she said that in the State of New York it was the law that you have to go to school regularly." And both of us cried. And she said, "If you don't go to school, they will put me in jail or else I have to pay some heavy fine." So that ended my traveling days and I went to school regularly. Now of course, I was a very, very poor student. I was very richly educated in languages and history but then frankly if you've been raised on Aztecs and blood sacrifices and things, Pilgrims are a bit boring. And spelling, I couldn't spell. The arithmetic I had learned in Mexico, they did it differently. I was a very poor student and I got very bad marks and I remember clearly one day, it was in the eighth grade and I said, "I'm fed up with being

the dumbest one in the class. I'm going to pay attention, do my homework and get it together." It certainly wasn't my mother motivating me. My father was in California. He was not pleased at the way my education was going. But within a month I was getting very good grades and then all through high school I was an A student.

*Q: Did you continue, was this still at the Catholic school?*

WELLS: Yes, I stayed on at Catholic school.

*Q: How'd you find, one hears about the nuns, some people in their 60s or 70s tremble when you mention Sister so and so.*

WELLS: They were very strict and then my parents were already breaking up and then I moved to live with my father in California, and then I mentioned my mother came home and the other boy was born. But even there I went to Catholic school because I became a Catholic. I hadn't been raised with a belief in much of anything. I used to follow Lupe our cook to church in Mexico and I liked the statues and I was very interested in the mummified nuns down below in the crypt. But it gave me something to hold onto during a very difficult time of my life.

*Q: How old were you when the divorce came?*

WELLS: Fourteen.

*Q: That's a very rough time.*

WELLS: And the roughest part, too, was when, it was a window, I don't think it lasted more than six months but the divorce took place in California, and in those days if a child was 14 years old it had to appear in court and the judge would ask, "You want to live with your mother or your father?" It didn't last very long. And of course, I was asked the question and I opted for my father. And of course, the whole courtroom, everybody's busy yakking and talking their own business, they don't hear. A traumatic experience.

*Q: One can simply sympathize. Then from the age of 14 you moved to where*

WELLS: First we lived in the house in Pacific Palisades, then we moved to Santa Monica.

*Q: Again, were you part of the aircraft industry or part of the movie industry*

WELLS: I was living with my father but I would see my mother regularly, couple of times a week and she, both parents remarried when I was a senior in high school. But I was back and forth between both homes but living with my father and going to high school, getting very good grades, seeing my mother who was determined that I would go into the movie business. Later on, I had three big time movie types ask for screen tests, would I be interested? And I didn't want to have anything to do with it. If I could sing, if

I had a voice like my mother, she tried and I had a very high register but if I didn't have anything in the middle. If I could dance, if I could act. Number one, you have to want to be these things and I didn't. I just wanted a career of my own and I wanted to serve. That's part of the religious background. To serve my country I loved in a world and this is now you're talking the beginning of the McCarthy period, the Cold War has already set in and so forth. And I felt with my languages and so forth maybe I could make a career.

*Q: In high school, you started high school I guess when, about 1946 or so?*

WELLS: 1946, yeah. I had the eighth grade in New York and I think I had like the last month in the eighth grade, then I moved and I never graduated because I got the measles, but I would have.

*Q: Sort of about that time. What about sort of American history and this sort of thing? Kids, you grow up in California, you knew about Fra Junipero Serra and the missions and all that sort of stuff. Were you getting a solid dose of American studies?*

WELLS: No, I must say the program in high school, Saint Monica's High School which is where I graduated in 1950, they had an excellent program. I owe a lot to those nuns. They had the so-called soft subjects which of course I never took, home economics and something else. My father of course, insisted that I take not just one but two years of algebra. That I take not just chemistry but physics as well, because he was pushing for the science side. And my mother, while it didn't affect my curriculum at all, she was hoping that I would go into the movies.

*Q: What about extracurricular things in high school?*

WELLS: Well extracurricular, the big one was swimming and I had wanted to take swimming, you had our general physical education classes and so forth but in those days there was such a fear of polio every summer and so forth. Both my parents, my father, both decided, "No, she should not go swimming, there's a danger there." Finally, by the time I got to be a sophomore, I pleaded and begged and they relented. So, I joined the swimming class. I wasn't doing much, I was having lots of fun at the end of the pool and I had a horrible stroke. I managed not to drown but I wouldn't call it swimming, it was dog paddling, cat paddling, whatever you want to call it. And I was diving for pennies, because I liked to dive. And then the woman who was the coach said, "Everybody down to this end of the pool. I want you all to swim as fast as you can down to the other end." I wanted to get on with my penny diving and so I got down there well ahead of everybody else and started diving for my pennies. And she came up to me and she said, "You should try to come out for the varsity." I didn't know what varsity meant. I'm just the school librarian and dive for pennies. Awfully tall, five ten and a half by the age of 13. I was taller than anything in the school. The nuns, the priests, the boys, the girls, I was it. I stopped growing and then everybody else began to catch up. And I was very, very thin. So anyway, one thing led to another and I became a very good swimmer and participated in Southern Pacific AAU and so forth and that led into something called synchronized

swimming which I love but which my coach in competitive swimming didn't know I was doing. Synchronized swimming didn't care what you did, but this other stuff...

*Q: This was the era of Esther Williams, too, wasn't it?*

WELLS: I met Esther and I worked with her at the Chase Hotel when she was, she was pregnant, I think the second time she was pregnant, and a wonderful woman. She would come down on Saturday morning and since we trained there she asked for volunteers to help her and I volunteered to teach blind children how to swim. Little ones, they were about five, six years old and I helped. Then she came to one of our prize, award ceremonies for swimming and I have a picture of getting a medal from her.

*Q: How about surfing and all that? Was that*

WELLS: Oh, yes, when we lived in Santa Monica, I was seven blocks from the beach and I lived on the beach. I thought every beach in the world looked like that. I was surfing and playing volleyball on the beach. 'Cause the swimming sort of opened up a lot of things. I became, sure, I was smart, I was brainy, everybody knew I was the gold pin kid. I knew every quarter I would get the little gold pin, meaning the highest average. But I wasn't popular. It was not that people disliked me. I was just not popular. Then I discovered this skill called swimming and started winning trophies for the school and they said, "Well, why don't you come out for basketball? Why don't you come out for volleyball?" and I became the vice president of the Girls Athletic Association. It developed my personality.

*Q: It gives you confidence.*

WELLS: Absolutely. I've seen it with so many other young kids.

*Q: Sports is so important.*

WELLS: So important.

*Q: Except for those who aren't very good. For a guy, I was the guy that everybody used to kick sand in my face.*

WELLS: What was it? Charles Atlas, bodybuilding, yes. I remember that vividly. I don't believe it.

*Q: On reading, what sort of reading, outside of what you were doing, what were you reading?*

WELLS: You mean in high school?

*Q: Yeah, books that you enjoyed reading. What sort of things were you reading?*

WELLS: Well, we had, as I say, the nuns were strict and they gave us long, hard reading lessons and I enjoyed reading most of that. Once I got through what I had to do, if I had any time left with my other studies and so forth, I enjoyed Willa Cather's books on Quebec and the French and Indian Wars, and there were about four or five books in the series. They were for young people but not children. Because what I decided to do, very systematic and methodical, I was the school librarian, well that lasted one year and I start with A. I'm not gonna read every single book on the shelf but just start scanning what interests me. *Ashler*, right.

*Q: I'll tell you one reason why I know. It came up, I was interviewing Judge Lawrence Silberman, who was ambassador to Yugoslavia. He wanted to get a full set of those for his kids. He loved them and I found them on the internet for him.*

WELLS: They had a few pictures, not many. And then, later on, of course when I got the travel bug and I wanted to see the world I read everything I could on Angkor Wat. I was fascinated by Southeast Asia, Africa, I developed a love for Africa reading adventure books.

*Q: What about movies? Were you a movie fan? Double features?*

WELLS: Oh, yes, double features. I remember I'd see most things that would come out. I loved the musicals, even though this life was not for me I loved watching musicals.

*Q: Did something like international affairs, diplomacy, Foreign Service, while you were in high school, cross your radar at all?*

WELLS: Well, it did and I'll tell you how. This was the senior year, approaching graduation and we were going to have Career Day. That means we were gonna focus on what we were gonna do after high school. And several options were trotted out. The first option was the nunnery. I'd passed that stage.

*Q: Were you ever tempted to put on the veil?*

WELLS: When I was very young, yes. Again, I wanted to go to Africa and do good. Then I started developing crushes on boys and things and I just put that aside. Then the next option was marriage. Well, with what my family had gone through I said, "Well maybe someday but certainly not now." Then we got a little more serious in terms, a teacher came and spoke to us, a nurse and an airline hostess. Out of all those the one that I liked was the airline business because you moved around, you got to see the world. So, I stood in line, quite a few of the people in my class stood in line behind me. Finally, my turn came. She took one look at me and she said, "Dear, you're much too tall. They'll never take you." So that was the end of that. I got this bug, my career, I thought of it already. I had this stage where I wanted to be a scientist, a research scientist, find cures for cancer. We didn't know about molecular biology and things like that, microbiology, that sort of thing. That didn't last very long. So then, my father was a good Republican and he read the Los Angeles *Examiner* and what was that columnist, Westbrook Pegler

*Q: Westbrook Pegler was a good, solid right winger.*

WELLS: Boy, was he far right and he talked about the pinkos in the State Department. I remember reading all this. Pinkos, yeah, I know what pinkos mean. In the Foreign Service. A hell of a way to get acquainted with the Foreign Service as you will appreciate. The Foreign Service, now wait a minute. I said to myself, "What is this? Forget the pinkos or greenos or whatever they are." So, I marched down to the Santa Monica Public Library and said, "I'd like some information of the United States Foreign Service." She found it. I sent for a booklet, couldn't take the library copy with me but *What is the Foreign Service?* There's an examination, you take it, the oral examination. That's for me!

*Q: Being raised by your father, this must have been, was he off very much? Were you kind of left on your own?*

WELLS: No, he was a scientist. He wasn't as outgoing a person as my mother was but very warm, very affectionate. And then of course I loved when I could finally open him up and get his story on what happened to him in World War I and the Revolution.

*Q: What did happen to him?*

WELLS: Well, he had gone to fight in the tsar's army during World War I, and then the Russian Revolution broke out and he joined the White Russians, General Anton Ivanovich Denikin's Army, which was eventually evacuated from the Crimea by the Red Cross. Fascinating story, because what they did was, they dumped him in Constantinople. He kept calling it Constantinople, I think that's what it was called and they got him a job in some restaurant peeling potatoes. This guy, he hadn't really started his, he would have been just on the verge of starting university, maybe had one year when the war started and so forth and he peeled potatoes. This came out one evening. He was preparing his favorite dish, sort of ground meat with peas and onions and chopped potatoes and I watched him peeling potatoes. I said, "How can you peel so fast?" Potatoes are not easy. Then he told me the story, that he peeled potatoes for one year. He was always very supportive.

*Q: At a Catholic girl's school, how about boys?*

WELLS: They were over on the other side of the building. They were not in the same class but they were near us.

*Q: You used to date.*

WELLS: Oh, yes but because I'd had the breakup of a family and so forth, it made a big impact

*Q: And swimming was more fun, anyway.*

WELLS: Yeah and then I linked up with this athletic crowd who would look down on what they called the “boy watchers” or whatever it was. Anyway, I was retarded in that department but I made up for it later.

*Q: So, you're graduating in 1950 and whither?*

WELLS: I had decided already that I was going into this Foreign Service and I learned about Georgetown University and this School of Foreign Service and that was where I want to go. But, number one, my father didn't have the money at the time. That's another story, what happened to the assets of the career and all that. And even if he had, he just, he was very strict and I didn't have a key to the front door until I was 18 years old, very strict European upbringing. So, I figured, well, I'm gonna get there but what I will do is study locally. I got a scholarship at Mount Saint Mary's College in Los Angeles and there I majored in economics, because I had already written to Georgetown University and seen their catalogue and their programs and I wanted to match as much of my undergraduate or rather lower class work as possible with what I would be getting at Georgetown. It was mainly economics. They are a lot of things you have to take, anyway. So, for two years I went there, but never intending to graduate.

*Q: How did you find it?*

WELLS: Mount Saint Mary's was, lots of people from Saint Monica's were planning on going either to Marymount or to Mount Saint Mary's.

*Q: Was it sort of a place to get a Mrs. degree?*

WELLS: No, it was more serious than that. It was very strong in nursing; it was very strong in social welfare. Economics, I had to rope two other friends in so they would give the course.

*Q: Economics was certainly not a*

WELLS: Yeah, but I had one teacher, Dr. Beerman, just a Dutchman recently evacuated from what is now Indonesia and it was a one on one. It was wonderful. And then the plan was, two years and then I'm gonna go to work and I'm gonna make some money and then I'm gonna go to Georgetown. Well what happened was, yes, I had my two years and I'm still swimming competitively and getting involved in synchronized swimming with a group. Then I heard about a show being put together to go to Europe, a water show, Aqua Parade. Okay, that's for me. This is not my lifetime career. I want to go to Europe and swim my way across Europe. 1953 this is, now. So, I auditioned, they accepted me and I quit my job, I didn't go back to school after my third year and then comes the news that “We don't have the contract yet for Europe but we do have a contract for Las Vegas and only those who go to Las Vegas will then go on to Europe.” The fact that I now was not able to sign my own contract, I wasn't 21 yet and my father would have to come sign the contract and that in addition to swimming I was to dance and show my legs to all those

gamblers, as he explained to me *ad nauseam*. We then performed in Las Vegas and then went on to Europe.

*Q: Tell me, on this, who was putting this thing together?*

WELLS: Well, for Las Vegas it was the same impresario who was negotiating with the European impresarios but hadn't gotten that together yet, who had contacts in Las Vegas. And the Desert Inn, which was the most elegant hotel in the 1950s, the only hotel in those days that had a golf course, they were redoing their showroom and that took time and they had to present two shows a night and three on Saturdays. So, they moved it out to the swimming pool and they wanted a water show and they built a stage out there for dancing. So, we performed six weeks I think in Las Vegas. Johnny Weissmuller was one of our stars.

*Q: He played Tarzan. He had been a world champion swimmer.*

WELLS: Absolutely, but that's when I learned how to dance.

*Q: Did they give you dance courses or something?*

WELLS: We had to learn to dance with, we had a separate pair of shoes to wear only for the lessons, which were three-inch heels with platforms. I was in good shape but I couldn't get out of bed, my legs were so sore. But it was fun. And then the contract came through to go to Europe and we went to Europe and toured in Torino and Genoa, Rome, then in Germany, then in Switzerland and then the show went broke and we had to be repatriated by the State Department which was not exactly the way I had planned to make my first connection with the State Department.

*Q: I would think a water show would be extremely difficult to put on.*

WELLS: We carried our equipment with us, a swimming pack, a diving pack and a stage. Then there in Europe I blossomed. I was swimming, I was dancing, and I was a showgirl as well, so my pay went up. Pay was not bad. Eventually when it all folded and everybody went home, they all went home without me. I didn't know they'd gone home because I had gone, spent Christmas with my aunt in Germany.

*Q: Did you feel that show biz was gonna lead anywhere?*

WELLS: No, I knew it wouldn't. It was a chance to travel. If I had not accepted these other offers that came along earlier, when I was living still near my mother and so forth, there's no way I was gonna do any of this. What it did do, it gave me a lot of confidence. You have to get yourself together to stand in front of people. This was before the days of nudity but it gave you presence, or gave me presence. I had to develop presence. And I had help from several of our coaches and I think it has stood me in good stead all through my career.

*Q: I have a sister-in-law who is quite tall, about your height and she used to have problems because she was just too tall with guys. So many tall women of your era sort of stooped a little because of this.*

WELLS: No, I never stooped but there was this weird situation where young men shorter than I seemed attracted to me. And I remember one, he was not particularly attractive and after the third time and I really didn't want to go out again, I said, "Doesn't it bother you that I'm so much taller than you?" And you know what he said? "There's so much more of you!"

*Q: When you came back, so, you're back, you finished three years at*

WELLS: Two years at Mount Saint Mary's, then had almost two years of this show business era, yeah. And then went straight back to Washington, D.C. and connected with Georgetown University, which was not accepting women in the day school, only at night school in 1955 when I started.

*Q: This is the School of Foreign Service.*

WELLS: School of Foreign Service, this is where I wanted to go. I eventually got there.

*Q: So, they'd only take you at night. Was Father Walsh still running the thing?*

WELLS: No, he was very ill and then he passed away very shortly after I arrived, or maybe he had just passed away. Father Favner was regent of the school.

*Q: Well how can you go to a night school, this is essentially a graduate school, night school?*

WELLS: It wasn't a graduate school. It was undergraduate. Their night school was really very good. Then of course I worked as an au pair, this was hardly known in those days, a lovely Washington woman, a hostess and a journalist and she had a niece and traveled a lot and I did light housekeeping and took care of Linda and had lots of time to study. But I did one semester and my grades were excellent and then I did the summer session, two sessions in the summer, my grades were very good. And before terms opened and I knew they were going to admit women

*Q: This is full time.*

WELLS: Full time, in the day school. For the first time ever. I went in to see Father Favner, who was one of Walsh's replacements, the regent of the whole school and I said to him and I said all this in speech I gave, a talk when they gave me an honorary doctorate in 1991, School of Foreign Service gave me an honorary doctorate as the first woman to graduate from the Foreign Service School, and I went in to see Father Favner, I'd asked for an appointment and I said, "Father, I have very good grades, here they are. I started in January of 1955. Now you're opening the day school and I need some help and

scholarship assistance and I don't qualify for anything" the exact words I used "because I'm not the son of a merchant seaman, I'm not the son of a Latin American diplomat, I'm not the son of whatever. God made me a woman!" He sort of looked at me and I said, "I really, is there some way you could help me because I'll be going to school here for the next 20 years, it seems." After about three minutes, I said, "Father, you think there's a chance you might help me?" Well, I got out of there so fast and I thought, "Well, that's it." And then within a very few days I got a very nice letter from him, I still have it, saying that as long as I kept up my what was it, B+ average, whatever it was, I would get 50 per cent scholarship assistance, 50, 75, I think it's more than that. And then of course I had to pay for my books and so forth. Well, I rushed out and I enrolled in the night school and I enrolled in the day school. The day school didn't know I was going to the night school, the night school didn't know I was going to the day school. I carried 24 units in a semester. All of this came out in my talk at the doctorate, and I graduated in 1957.

*Q: Well how did you, where did you get the rest of the money?*

WELLS: My father helped me and au pairing. I had room and board and she paid me \$75 a month, which was very generous for those days, very generous.

*Q: The school, was there a difference between the night school and the day school?*

WELLS: A great difference, because the night school, you had guys who were on the GI Bill (the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944), really serious students, been in the war, mainly the Korean Conflict, and day school was more of a lark, younger men, not that they weren't serious, very tough all around.

*Q: But it was still a good school where well-placed Catholic young men went. It was considered one of the better Catholic schools but not really aspiring to be an Ivy League, which it has become.*

WELLS: It has become. It wasn't at that time. Close to it but not there. And the reason, because it was Peter Crowe who was the dean of the School of Foreign Service and whom I'd known earlier, when I was already in the service, and it was he who called me, I was ambassador to Zaire and said, "We'd like to give you an honorary doctorate" because I was leaving earlier, so I postponed my departure to be able to be here for the commencement exercises, and I was a speaker and they gave me the degree. Peter said, "Because of your work but also, Melissa, because I've checked the records and you are the first woman to graduate from the Foreign Service School." I said, "Peter, that's not right. I know there were women who had gone through the night school but I'm not sure whether they ever did the whole course and got a degree from night school or not." He's the one who told me and it's quite clear because I had two years credit from Mount Saint Mary's, I had been to the night school, so all I needed to do was make that push over the hump to get to the degree. So, I was the first woman to graduate.

*Q: Did you feel that the School of Foreign Service had any particular focus at all at that time, what they were turning out? Were people coming in looking to go into the State Department or were they coming to look at banking or*

WELLS: Let's say, they had three programs. One was what you call diplomatic and consular, they had business, commercial and they had travel. And I'd say a good 50 to 60 per cent were aiming for the Foreign Service from there. A small handful were doing the travel, and I don't think that existed for very long, international travel, to become international travel executives or agents or whatever. And then the remainder, which would have been 25 per cent or 30 per cent, would have been commercial.

*Q: I assume at some point you took the Foreign Service exam.*

WELLS: Yes, I took it three times. First time I took it, I was bowled over. I'd never seen an exam like this. I never covered the territory. I got a terrible grade. Then came up again and I took it, and I missed by one point. I became better at learning how to take the exam. Now, most of the kids learn how to take the exam but we didn't do that in those days. So then when I took it for the third time, I got a very good grade. Then I was called fairly early for my oral examination and came into the Foreign Service in 1958.

*Q: You recall your oral exam? Tell me about it.*

WELLS: Went on for almost two hours, here in Washington and, of course, in those days all women taking the exam were prepared for the inevitable question, which is never asked nowadays, "Miss X, what are your marriage plans?" If you say "I would like to get married sometime" but then they say "You can't combine a career with marriage. Don't waste our time." My ploy was I was going to try to make them laugh and drop the subject and move on to something else. So about five minutes into the exam. "Miss Foelsch, may I ask, what are your marriage plans?" I had rehearsed this carefully. It helps to be on stage. "I'm nearly six feet tall and I weigh two pounds more than Sugar Ray Robinson and I just can't find the right guy." And they laughed. It's a stupid answer.

*Q: You recall any other sort of questions? What other things were they asking?*

WELLS: Oh, they asked questions, they pinpointed a lot of things on geography. You write a little autobiography and I had indicated an interest in Africa. One of them said, "What is the source of the Nile?" I wasn't being smart alecky, I just said, "The White Nile or the Blue Nile?" They didn't ask in depth questions, the kind that I would ask. I would ask things like "What do you think of capital punishment?" There's no right or wrong answer but I just want to see where you come out and reason and see whether you're trying to psyche me out or what it is. But they didn't ask things like that. They asked questions about the Cold War, about the state of Germany, predominantly factual questions.

*Q: Did they give you problems?*

WELLS: No. They asked what books I'd been reading. They asked "In American history is there an incident that you particularly are familiar with?" I said, "Yes, my very favorite incident in American history is the Louisiana Purchase. These guys had gone off to buy rights to warehouse stuff in New Orleans and Napoleon was prepared to give 'em this big chunk for what, three million dollars, in those days." And then one of 'em says, "So you believe in acting without instructions?" I said, "Case like this, obviously yes."

*Q: Tell me, while you were at Georgetown, obviously it's the heart of Washington and the Capital and the School of Foreign Service and it's been a feeder for eons to the Foreign Service. What were you picking up from people you talked to about the Foreign Service per se?*

WELLS: It was only when I got to Washington, started working for my employer there, who knew a lot of people in the State Department, that I met my first Foreign Service officers, not a woman, not women. They all encouraged me and then they said, "Well, look, there are very few women, and if you do get in expect it to be very difficult to be promoted because the Service is not ready for women." And some of them were speaking exactly what they felt, saying it is not a career suitable for a woman.

*Q: Were there any women in the Foreign Service at that time that people were sort of pointing to, sort of role models?*

WELLS: Yes, I remember Jean Wilkowsky, I met with her. She had been in five-six years before I came in. I actually met her. Then of course there were women who'd been in the Service but then I didn't know and that I knew about, their names escape me now. But as far as women in the Service, aside from my age group, and we were very few and far between, women who came in, very, very few. Elinor Constable, I knew her briefly, when I came in. There were very few.

*Q: So, you came into the Foreign Service when, actually?*

WELLS: September 11, 1958.

*Q: Can you characterize your A-100 course, your basic officer course?*

WELLS: It wasn't really very exciting. The consular course was given together with it, which made it go on for three, maybe four months. They gave us the structure of the Department, it was not very good. We had lots of speakers. For the last 10 years I have been mentor to a class a number of times and have spoken and made myself, when I'm around and not overseas, made myself available to members of the class to come call me up, come have a drink or whatever it is and let's talk about anything you like. We had nothing like that, nothing at all.

*Q: Did your group coalesce?*

WELLS: It stuck together for a while. Most of us, at least half of us, 30 in the class, had Washington assignments. This oscillated back and forth, the philosophy being well, send them overseas to see how they function overseas, whether they like us, whether we like them. On the other side, they need to understand how the big house operates and give them a Washington assignment. I ended up with a Washington assignment, in INR (the Bureau of Intelligence and Research).

*Q: While you were getting ready to go into the Foreign Service and even in class, were you looking for, did you have any area or specialty that you particularly wanted to work on?*

WELLS: I always wanted to go to Africa but then what happened was that once I was graduated from Georgetown then I went back to California, and then I applied and this was under the guidance of the wonderful Dr. Carroll Quigley, remember him?

*Q: Oh, yeah, ethics and all at Georgetown.*

WELLS: He knew I had an interest in Africa and so did he. He's the one who said, "Why don't you apply for scholarships at Boston University and at Northwestern?" Northwestern would have been studying with Melville Herskowitz. And I got both of them and accepted the Northwestern one. Then I just wanted to walk in the graduation ceremony, because I finished at the end of the summer of 1956 and there was no ceremony. So, I came back in 1957 to Washington with the idea of, I was staying with friends and going through the ceremony, the graduation ceremony, it was the class of 1957 but I'm actually class of 1956, cap and gown, the whole lot and then to go off to Evanston, Illinois. And while I was here and I was going to spend most of the summer here, I was working for a temporary agency, work here, couple of weeks there, so forth. That came through this woman I used to work for. And she said, "Look, you remember the Bolivian ambassador, Victor Androtti? His secretary's having an operation and he desperately needs a secretary. You're bilingual; you can take dictation in Spanish." So, I went to work for the Bolivian embassy, secretary to the ambassador. It was supposed to last about a month, until Millie recovered and came back. And then she didn't recover quickly, it went on for another couple of weeks and then she came back and just as I'm about to leave because I have this scholarship to go take up at Northwestern, creditors of the Bolivian government start attaching their accounts in the United States. It's an interesting incident, I've never heard of anything like this happening before. Androtti immediately, on his own, took over all of the accounts of the Banco Central de Bolivia and the Corporacion Minera, and put them under the name of the embassy, giving them diplomatic immunity. Had them at Riggs, we had them at National Bank of Washington, then and all this money's coming in. He said, "You can't leave me now. You have to sort this out. If we pay for your graduate studies at Georgetown University in Latin America area studies, will you stay?" I decided to stay. And I gave it up, the Herskowitz thing. And I would have been one of the first graduate students out of that program. I finished my Latin American area studies. I told you I took the exam three times. So, I go to school at night, at the graduate school at Georgetown in Latin America, and they pay my tuition. So, one of the poorest countries in Latin America funded the graduate studies by this

ambassador. And I have lovely letters of thanks from the Banco Central, from the Corporacion Minera. I have never had so much authority since.

*Q: What a wonderful diplomatic experience.*

WELLS: Absolutely and I loved the Bolivians. Of course, the ambassador and his wife and their two children became very, very close friends. When I got married and I had our first son the ambassador and Blanca were the godparents. They've since passed away but we're still in touch with their daughters.

*Q: So, you went to INR.*

WELLS: I went to INR.

*Q: By the way, had you picked up in the corridor, usually there's corridor knowledge every new officer gets, what field to go into, what geographic area. Were you told where were the best opportunities or was it still Africa?*

WELLS: Well, I wanted to go to Africa. I wanted to go anywhere, to use my languages, because what I brought with me to the State Department was German, Spanish, Italian, and French, which I then upgraded to a three (on a scale of 0 to 5) through early morning language class. Portuguese came later. Early morning Russian I had a little bit. But it was made very clear to me that I would never go anywhere near Eastern Europe because of all my relatives there. Then I said Africa, Latin America, Western Europe is where I wanted to go.

*Q: Africa, of course, in 1958 was just on the cusp of this decolonization opening up. This was considered pretty hot stuff in the Foreign Service in those days.*

WELLS: That was 1960, when we opened all those posts.

*Q: In INR, where'd you go in INR?*

WELLS: Western Europe. I was the analyst for Western Germany, Austria and Switzerland. And the bulk of my work was on Berlin.

*Q: Oh, yes. Talk about Eleanor Dulles.*

WELLS: I never got to know her well but my boss took me in to meet her and it was, having one crisis after another and sort of a hard woman, she seemed very serious, but underneath she was quite warm because I remember I wrote something once, what you call an intelligence note, just two, three paragraphs or something and I took it in. She looked at it and said, peering over her glasses, I don't know why her chair was so high but her feet never seemed to touch the floor. "This is excellent, excellent. I congratulate you." Aside from that, I didn't know her well.

*Q: Dealing with Berlin, there must have been a book on Berlin of all the rules and regulations, because at that time we were extremely careful not to give away anything. What sort of things were you doing on Berlin?*

WELLS: Well, what we were doing, one of the things was that we, a lot of this was generated by the desk itself because they would ask for, for example, spot reports, like a weekly, on all sorts of various things such as currency exchange, black market exchange, transport going in and out, whatever. The other area, which was quite a hot potato in those days, was the Tyrol, between Italy and Austria. Austria was one of my countries, you see.

*Q: There was bombing going on*

WELLS: Yes, they're not supposed to behave like this. That's actually how I met my husband, because he came as the new Austria desk officer, we were working on the Tyrol, got to know each other.

*Q: What were we trying to do with the Tyrol? Just keep it from doing something to each other or did we have a stand or*

WELLS: Well, what we were really trying to do was not to get the Italians mad at us by giving them a larger say. I remember the Italian position: the Sicilians have got practically an autonomous state down there, Sardinia and now you want us to give the northeast away or something like that. But it was eventually worked out with a larger say in terms of education, and so forth, and the use of German in the schools.

*Q: How about Austria? This was only about three years after its...*

WELLS: *Staatsvertrag.*

*Q: Yeah and were we seeing the rise of a new Austria? How were we viewing it?*

WELLS: No, it was sort of locked in. The party in power at that time was the *Volkspartei*. They were being very, very circumspect with anything they did, in terms of being keen to be equally attentive to both sides of the Curtain.

*Q: In Berlin, at that point were we concerned about maybe a war starting there or was it a quiet time?*

WELLS: It was before the Wall went up.

*Q: You were there 1958 to*

WELLS: I started there in early 1959 and then I was there for all of 1959 and for 1960 and 1961. Whatever it was, my two years had come to an end and I moved over to Latin America. That makes it early 1961, I went over to the Latin American side of INR.

*Q: I've heard people say that when the Kennedy Administration came in there was considerable nervousness because the Kennedy Administration, they were a bunch of pretty young people, were running around, talking about how they were gonna do this or that and there was concern that they might give away too much on Berlin in order to make some*

WELLS: I just missed that because Kennedy was elected November 1960 and took over January 1961, which was when I shifted. But I remember hearing that, as well. I remember in the Latin American portion of INR, Kennedy wanted to go to Punta del Este, a trade thing, the Kennedy Round. I was more involved with that. I remember hearing that, too.

*Q: Later, stand on the Berlin Wall and all but*

WELLS: The Berlin Wall was in 1961, later.

*Q: Yeah, but he was, the Kennedy group was considered to be a little bit loose on Berlin.*

WELLS: I think, if I recall correctly, now I'm telescoping a couple of years, I think there was that feeling that they were a little loose, up until the Cuban missile crisis. Boy, then there was nothing loose anymore.

*Q: When you moved over to Latin American affairs, what did you have, what part of the action did you have?*

WELLS: I had Paraguay, Uruguay, Argentina. Part of Argentina, I had economic Argentina.

*Q: In Paraguay, it was Alfredo Stroessner and did we just consider him sort of an elemental force?*

WELLS: And he never moved, yeah.

*Q: Uruguay?*

WELLS: Uruguay was still, it was before the time of the Tupamaros and all that and it was still the little Switzerland of Latin America, although beginning to have economic problems, with the meat packing areas.

*Q: Well if you had the economic side of Argentina, because today we're talking Argentina being as bad an economic disaster as one can think of, with no particular solution, apparently. How was Argentina then?*

WELLS: In those days the economic side was fairly stable. It was, they kept having one change of government after another, one military leader after another.

*Q: Was Peron in or out?*

WELLS: Out and he was followed by one general after another.

*Q: How'd you find INR in those days? It was mostly civil service, wasn't it?*

WELLS: A lot of civil servants, yes and we worked very well with them. It was, we were working on something called the NIS, the National Intelligence Survey.

*Q: This was an encyclopedia of everything you wanted to know about a country.*

WELLS: I remember one of the chapters I had to write on was, I think it was Chapter 55, was propaganda in Switzerland. I managed to squeeze together something. No, Argentina was more of a political discontinuity that was troublesome.

*Q: Were we trying to do anything in Argentina? Sometimes we've gotten quite active down there and other times we sort of sit off to the side and wring our hands.*

WELLS: No, I don't recall that we were. Remember, this was of course the big Kennedy initiative

*Q: Alliance for Progress.*

WELLS: Alliance for Progress was just getting off the ground and this paper for this country, for that country, so forth.

*Q: Did you feel much connection with the desks?*

WELLS: You were asking about life in INR and that was the one distinctive memory I have, both on the Latin American side and on the Western European side, is that almost innate fear that the desks didn't take us seriously, that they felt that we were like a necessary evil there, that they had to do something, give us something to do. God forbid when we came up with our self-generated think pieces that hadn't been requested by the desk. That got troublesome sometimes. It, again, depended so often on personalities.

*Q: A little later I was, I had the Horn of Africa in INR from 1960 to 1961. I think I got it because I had been in Dhahran and I had a Tigrean houseboy. That was my only connection I could think of but, no, the desk had people who had been there, served there and we weren't really contributing to anything.*

WELLS: Well that was the problem, too, because here you have these young whippersnappers who had never been overseas, some of them, most of them had been somewhere at some point but certainly didn't know the countries. At least I had been to Germany and I spoke pretty good German. That was always the case. One of the things I did enjoy very much was, we had the early morning briefing. You would take turns and

appear, come in at like at five or five thirty in the morning and read all the take and then prepare a briefing for the assistant secretary. I knew about this and I kept waiting for my turn to come up. There were two other, three other guys from my class, no two and I think one was already there, another junior officer and I kept waiting for my turn to come up to go for the early morning briefing. And a month went by and two months went by and a third month and I said, "When is my turn going to come up?" And I remember the guy, Frank, he said to me, Frank Kemler, he said, "Melissa, we decided that

*Q: This is tape 2, side 1, Melissa Wells*

WELLS: So, I was waiting, when is my turn, to do your morning briefing? So, when I sorted myself and asked my fellow junior offices, a fellow named Frank said that "Oh, Melissa, we decided it was not safe for you to be on the streets by five thirty in the morning." I didn't have car – but you know it wasn't that far. It was to Georgetown. I'd take a bus or a taxi. "So, we have pooled ourselves, we take it over." But then I said, you can't do that. You're depriving me of the experience and the chance to meet with the Secretary. Now I won't agree when people say "that's discrimination" – that's not discrimination. This is very gentlemanly behavior and it never occurred to them that they were cutting me out of something which was important in terms of my career.

Now I'm on my Latin America side and it's an early morning briefing. And I got to know a very eager beaver who was Mr. Cuba in INR those days. And I had arranged for him to drive and he would pick me up and both of us would go to the Department. Then I got in and there were strange reports coming from the new wire services about the invasion, you know. This would have been April, 1961 – the invasion of Cuba. And so, I called and said - I knew he was at his desk - and I said "Laurel, I'm reading this stuff" and I said "What the hell is going on? Do you know? Is this something you should tell me? I have to go up and do a briefing! In 45 minutes! And there's nothing in the tape – there's nothing!" Then he said, "I don't know nothing either!"

*Q: So, I think we should probably start this after. I put at the end where we left off so we'll pick this up in 1961 and where did you go?*

WELLS: Well – I got married in 1960, I think we need to cover that.

*Q: Yes, we will cover that.*

WELLS: And then my first assignment.

*Q: Great!*

*End of interview*