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

LAWRENCE I. PLOTKIN

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 21st of June, 2004. This is an interview with Lawrence I. Plotkin. What does the "I" stand for?

PLOTKIN: Isadore.

Q: Well, begin with when and where were you born?

PLOTKIN: I was born on October 24, 1939 in Chicago, Illinois.

Q: Where in Chicago?

PLOTKIN: Northside, Cub fans.

Q: Where did your father's side of the family come from?

PLOTKIN: All Plotkins I've ever encountered come from between Warsaw and Moscow.

Both sides of my family came from a small town now in Poland, though it has moved back and forth several times among Russia, Poland and Belarus. It's about ten miles west of the Bug River and is called Siemyatiche. The town probably never had more than 10,000 inhabitants and in the late 19th century was predominantly Jewish.

Q: Do you know when the family exodus took place and the circumstances?

PLOTKIN: My immediate family arrived in the U.S. one-by-one between 1900 and 1917, driven from Poland by a combination of repression against Jews there and the hope of opportunity here. My father's father, Nachman Plotkin, was the first to make the move. He arrived in 1900 at the age of about 21. My father's mother, born Jenny (or Shajna) Weiss, came over shortly thereafter. They met and married in Chicago.

Q: What did your great grandfather do in Poland?

PLOTKIN: I'm not sure how accurate the information is, but I was told the family had a pottery factory of some kind in Poland. I don't know anything about its size.

Q: Your grandfather was the first one over here. Did you know him?

PLOTKIN: Yes, quite well. Not as well as I would like to have. I was in my early twenties when he died and, like so many of us, didn't ask him the kind of questions I would ask him today.

Q: What did he do?

PLOTKIN: He arrived in Chicago following the arrival of others who had come from the same part of Poland and joined an established community of Polish-Jewish immigrants within the larger community in Chicago. It was on the north side of the city. His home and business was run from a building on Evergreen Street. He owned and operated a hauling business initially using horses and wagons and later using trucks.

Q: Your father?

PLOTKIN: My father was born in Chicago on May 9, 1914. He went to public schools there, but got himself in trouble in the seventh grade. The story I was told was that he didn't want to go swimming and ended up pushing the swimming instructor into the swimming pool. He ever went back to school again. It was some while before his family knew what he had done because he went out and found himself a job – something you could do at 13 or 14 in those days. This would have been roughly 1930. Finally the school contacted my grandparents and asked, "Where is Abe?" When his parents confronted him with the truth, his response was, "I'm out; I'm earning some money; I don't' want to go back to school;" and that, apparently, was the end of the discussion.

Q: What did he work his way into doing?

PLOTKIN: He ended up working in wholesale liquor sales in Los Angeles. He and his brother had owned a package store and bar in Chicago. After the war, one of his contacts offered him a job in liquor sales. We moved to L.A. in July 1945. We made the trip in a 1939 Chevy and I'm told that I stood – this was before anyone thought of seatbelts - all the way to the west coast.

Q: Was your father in the military?

PLOTKIN: He had fallen on an icy sidewalk and cracked a couple of vertebrae in his spine in a fall as a young man, so was 4F. It eventually required surgery. He worked as a foreman in an aircraft factory in Chicago during the Second World War building the gunner's bubbles for bombers.

Q: How about your mother's side.

PLOTKIN: They were from the same part of Poland, although with a rather different history. Eastern Poland was, at that time, part of Russia. Poland didn't exist as a state; its territory had been divided among Germany, Prussia, and Austria. My mother's father, Louis Rothstein, who died relatively young and whom I never knew, was in the Polish underground and was a wanted man by the Russians for some incident in which he'd participated. He was smuggled out of the country and worked his way to the United States. He was a tailor. Her mother, Rebecca Resnick, arrived in about 1912, my only grandparent who didn't enter the U.S. through Ellis Island. She was sponsored by an uncle already in the U.S., was sent a ticket that was at least above steerage, and entered via Philadelphia.

Q: Did any of the older generation of your family go on to university?

PLOTKIN: No. The first person in my family, and the only one before me to get a university education, was one of my father's older brothers, Sam. He earned a degree in architecture from the University of Chicago, but graduated as the depression hit and never practiced. His entire working career was spent as a tool design engineer. My father's eldest brother, Isadore, was a classical violinist with the Chicago Symphony. He and several other musicians were killed when their car was hit by a train at one of Chicago's many crossings. My father had an older sister as well, Goldie, who played a crucial role in my life. She introduced my parents to each other.

Q: How did your mother and father meet and what was your mother doing?

PLOTKIN: My mother was the eldest of four children. Her father died when she was still in high school, in the 11th grade. She left school to help support the family. The family moved to Los Angeles (I'm not sure how that came about) and she found a job there working as a sales girl and helping to raise her significantly younger brother and sister. One of her jobs was at the Farmer's Market in West Los Angeles at a nut and dried fruit

stall.

At about the same time my father, who was the youngest of the four children in his family, was visiting his older sister. She had married and moved to Los Angeles in the mid-'30s. His sister knew my mother's mother, and was instrumental in my parent's meeting one another in Los Angeles. My father returned to Chicago and, a short time later, my mother and her family returned to Milwaukee where she'd been born, but they kept in touch and romance blossomed.

Q: Where in Los Angeles did your family move to in 1945?

PLOTKIN: Initially the East Side, to a community called City Terrace, at the eastern edge of Los Angeles. The next town east was Alhambra which is outside of L.A.'s borders. Between City Terrace and Alhambra there were fields with horses running free and Bird Egg Creek where I caught tadpoles. Not the Los Angeles of today or what people think of when L.A. is mentioned. But, of course, Bird Egg Creek and the fields are all paved over now.

Q: You mentioned that you are Jewish. How religious was your family?

PLOTKIN: Not very. I did go to Hebrew school afternoons and I was bar mitzvahed, but it was largely for the sake of grandparents. My parents were very secular, never attended synagogue regularly and didn't keep kosher. I am less religious than they were.

Q: Did you have enough Jewish identity to be aware of pertinent world events?

PLOTKIN: Don't mistake me. We thought of ourselves as Jews, were culturally very Jewish, even if not religious, and we lived in a neighborhood with a high percentage of Jewish families. The struggle to create the state of Israel was the first international political event I was fully aware of. The Second World War had very little impact on me both because I was very young and because my father wasn't in the military. I was equally indifferent to domestic political events. But I closely tracked the battle for to establish a Jewish state in Israel and, to a somewhat lesser degree, the role of the United Nations in validating Israel's existence.

Q: How old were you?

PLOTKIN: I was nine in 1948 when it happened.

Q: Did your family read newspapers, listen to the news and that sort of thing?

PLOTKIN: Despite the fact that neither of my parents graduated from high school, they both were voracious readers; there were books in the house all the time. They also liked music of a variety of sorts. At least one newspaper was delivered daily. I grew up with the old Los Angeles News, an afternoon paper. It died when television began to dominate

news in the evenings.

Q: How big was your family?

PLOTKIN: Just four of us, I have a sister three years younger that I am.

Q: Where did you go to elementary school?

PLOTKIN: I went to public schools, starting with City Terrace Elementary School which, to my surprise, I discovered after joining the Foreign Service, produced at least three USIA officers. I never took a survey to find out if there was a fourth somewhere.

Q: What interested you in elementary school?

PLOTKIN: Beyond the normal stuff, books. The most influential teacher in my life was Mrs. Candlish, my fourth grade teacher. We were reading a children's version of *Tom Sawyer* and we had the regular version of *Tom Sawyer* on the shelf at home. I brought it to class and asked Mrs. Candlish if I could read that instead of the kid's version. Her response was, "Of course you can. But if you have any questions or difficulties, we'll talk after class. Don't interrupt class or the other kids." It was a real milestone in my growth as a reader.

Q: Were there any other books in addition to Tom Sawyer that had an influence on you?

PLOTKIN: None that I recall. I read a lot, but the quality of what I read was random. I read a lot of historical fiction when I was 12 or 13. I didn't get more serious or focused about what I read until I was in college.

Q: How about movies? You came from Southern California.

PLOTKIN: The industry had no impact on my life; no one in my family or among my friends was a part of it.

Q: How about the cultural impact?

PLOTKIN: Like every kid, I went to Saturday matinees almost every weekend and saw most of the great films of the period and a lot of garbage. Matinees then cost between nine cents and a quarter, depending on the theater.

Q: It was an interesting time because there really weren't that many kids' movies. Except for westerns, most of the movies were for adults and the kids adjusted to them.

PLOTKIN: Westerns and the Disney films. Even some of the cowboy movies were more serious. I was a fan of Randolph Scott who wasn't a puff cowboy, but played a more realistic, nitty-gritty character by far than someone like Roy Rogers whose films were

aimed at kids.

Q: Did you get involved in sports early on?

PLOTKIN: Only the usual pick-up games of baseball and football in the street or playground. I was never on a team. I rode my Schwinn everywhere.

Q: Growing up when you did, Los Angeles wasn't a bad place for a kid, was it?

PLOTKIN: It was a great place because I really had the best of both worlds, country and city. I had rural America a block behind the house where I really could go chase horses and capture tadpoles and bring them home and raise them into frogs and drive my mother crazy. On the other hand I could bicycle to Chinatown a few miles to the west and buy fireworks for the Fourth of July. And I could bicycle to the next community over, Boyle Heights, where there was a bigger public library. I could do these things without any sense of being at risk. There was a wide variety of experience available to me - city and country - in a way that's probably rather rare these days. If using my bike wasn't practical, there was the red car, an interurban train system that ran nearby our house.

Q: How about high school?

PLOTKIN: We moved to the West Side of Los Angeles when I was 15. I went to Hamilton High School and lived in Cheviot Hills, a few miles south of Beverley Hills. The neighborhood ranged from middle class to upper middle class and was almost entirely white. The school was sometimes called Hamilstein because the majority of the students were Jewish. When we stayed home on religious holidays, they pretty much shut down the school.

Q: Did you hang around with Jewish kids or was it a mix?

PLOTKIN: All of my friends in high school were Jewish. That changed once I got to university.

Q: Was there any tension or any problems?

PLOTKIN: There were some problems, not in high school, but in the junior high school I went to in East L.A., Woodrow Wilson Junior High. It was actually a combined junior high school and high school. I got into a couple of fights based on religious insults.

Q: How about politics? Where did your family fall? Were politics important to them?

PLOTKIN: Politics were important. My parents were children of the Depression and knew what poverty was. Of course, they were also very much interested in the creation of Israel. Politically, they were right in the middle of the spectrum of the Democratic Party.

Q: Was FDR deified?

PLOTKIN: He was highly admired, but not deified.

Q: What about the world outside of Israel?

PLOTKIN: The Korean War had a real impact, in part because the young man next door served in Korea and my parents were close to his parents. It gave immediacy to events there. I also had cousins who also served in Korea.

So did the Cold War. Like everyone else I was ducking under the desk putting my hands over my head trying to avoid the atomic holocaust. There was a strong awareness of the great Soviet enemy out there, which could at any moment attack and destroy us.

There was also the fascination with the McCarthy hearings, partly because I was vaguely aware that the parents of some of my elementary school friends had communist sympathies.

Q: Was there pressure to support Israel beyond a general interesting its success?

PLOTKIN: I don't know whether pressure played any role in it, but, like many, my family bought Israel bonds and may have contributed financially in other ways. Most of their information came from the usual media and, to some degree, through Jewish media.

Q: In high school, what were your interests?

PLOTKIN: Girls, sports and popular music. When I found time for other pursuits, I was a math and science major, academic areas I abandoned after a couple of years of college. My first active involvement in anything of international interest came when I was one of three seniors at my high school who founded the high school's chapter of AFIS, The American Field Service International Student Exchange. Unfortunately, because I was already a senior I wasn't eligible to go abroad on the exchange. American students went for the summer between their junior and senior years and were expected to return and share their experiences. But I was deeply involved in setting up the program and writing its bylaws.

Q: When you were in high school, did you have thoughts or interest in working overseas?

PLOTKIN: None. I always intended to go to UCLA and never applied to another university. It was simply a given that my grades were going to be good enough and I would be admitted. I entered UCLA as a pre-dent major, planning to be an orthodontist, so my first two years of college were by and large dedicated to the sciences, taking the same courses as the pre-med students. I even took the ADA, the American Dental Association, exam and did well enough to get a letter of admissions from Northwestern after two years of college. You could do that then; you didn't need to complete a

bachelor's degree in a related field.

But I was given permission to take a junior level Shakespeare course as a sophomore and, in effect, it changed my life. I became an English major, wrote a polite letter to Northwestern saying I'd decided to get my bachelor's degree before further considering a professional school, and ended up going on to graduate school in English literature at UCLA.

Q: How about newspaper publications, school paper?

PLOTKIN: I was an editor of a poetry journal at UCLA when I was in graduate school and contributed a few op-ed pieces to the Daily Bruin. That was really it.

Q: How did you find UCLA? It was a large university when you were there, wasn't it?

PLOTKIN: It was big for then. It's much bigger now. When I entered UCLA in September 1957, there were about 17,000 students there. That might seem overwhelming, but you could find your own group within that crowd. Once you did, it really didn't matter that all these other people were there. I fairly quickly found a smaller community of students with like interests intellectually and socially and was just fine. While I was part of the pre-med/pre-dent crowd, there was another aspect to my student life.

UCLA had a young English professor, Rudy Habenicht - he's deceased now - who started a student group called, quite pretentiously, the Bronze Age Stone Circle Society. We were all intellectually pompous freshmen and sophomores. We met weekly and each week one of us had to present a paper which was then savaged by the rest of the group. The group was highly intellectual, highly competitive and pretentious, but we really challenged each other. It provided a balanced to the science classes I was taking. It was the first step toward my degrees in English literature.

Q: What was your concentration In English literature?

PLOTKIN: My field was 16th and 17th Century English drama. I taught full time for five years before joining the Foreign Service. But, I ended up an ABD. I wrote the better part of a doctoral dissertation, but ultimately didn't finish. All But Dissertation, ABD. I left UCLA in 1967 with a half finished dissertation at a time when the job market wasn't very good for new Ph.D.s or Ph.D. candidates. I had gone to the December 1966 Modern Language Association meeting, the job market for university faculties in language and literature. I got two offers and accepted a position as lecturer at a branch of Indiana University. I was hired by Indiana Bloomington, but seconded to the IU branch in Fort Wayne. Fort Wayne could then best be described as a great place to raise a family, but I was single. I realized, too, that I was no scholar. I was never going to write the new break-through book on anything. After five years in Fort Wayne, I decided I'd best quit before they fired me, and did so.

Q: How about teaching?

PLOTKIN: Teaching was great and I might have stayed had that been the only thing of concern. Fortunately, publish or perish was alive and well even at I.U. Fort Wayne. There was no way, even had I finished my dissertation, that I would have been given tenure without publications. It seemed a good idea to find something else to do with my life.

Q: Was there anything else in academic life that influenced your decision?

PLOTKIN: I've often told people that in almost 30 years of government service I never went to a committee meeting that held a candle to a faculty meeting for ego, duration, and a total lack of discipline. Academic meetings made every government meeting I ever attended seem efficient. Whenever I got fed up I would think back to faculty meetings in Fort Wayne and think this ain't that bad.

Q: When were you in Fort Wayne?

PLOTKIN: I was there for five academic years, fall 1967 through June 1972.

Q: Those were years when lots was happening on campuses. How did this hit Indiana?

PLOTKIN: IU Fort Wayne was then entirely a commuter campus. When I arrived it had an enrollment of no more than 6,000, including part-time students. Part of the reason I accepted the job was that the English department faculty was small. It gave me the opportunity to teach classes that, had I gone to a major campus, I would have waited years to teach, waiting for senior professors to retire or die. Further, I didn't have to teach freshman comp. My first semester there I was able to teach a class in 17th Century lyric poetry, the second semester I taught a semester course on Milton. I was immediately involved in much more specialized subjects than I would have been elsewhere.

Vietnam was a very serious issue on campus, but student activism and turmoil in Fort Wayne was nothing compared to that at campuses like UCLA or Berkeley or Columbia or any of the other schools where there were dramatic and even violent demonstrations.

Q: How did you find the student body?

PLOTKIN: The student body was academically solid. I had been a teaching assistant at UCLA where there were strong admission standards and students were generally very good. I was fortunate at IU Fort Wayne, which had substantially lower admission standards, to have, in every class I taught, at least one or two students who were as good as any I'd taught at UCLA. So a Fort Wayne "A" met the same standards as a UCLA "A." Overall, my students were inquisitive and reasonably bright. Some of the best of them were women in their late '20s and early '30s who had married right after high school, started families, finally had their kids finally in school all day and were going to university for the first time. They were bright and, because they had real experience in the

world, understood things about what they were reading at 27 that they wouldn't have understood at 17.

Q: Was there much minority representation at Indiana Fort Wayne?

PLOTKIN: The minority population of Fort Wayne was small, but I did have a few Hispanics and African Americans among my students.

Q: What about Slavic influence? There's a fairly sizeable Slavic community in that area.

PLOTKIN: Not in Fort Wayne. They are more heavily represented in the coal mining and steel mill towns, places like Gary, Indiana.

Q: What did you do after you left IU?

PLOTKIN: I got lucky. Once I decided that I was going to leave the university, I went to the federal building in Fort Wayne to sign up for the G.S. exam. I'd traveled very little out of the United States and had never been in an embassy; the Foreign Service didn't even exist in my mind. But the woman behind the desk at the federal office building said, "You know, there's a Foreign Service exam as well. Do you think you'd be interested?" She handed me some material and of course I was interested. It sounded like a great idea. I signed up for the Foreign Service exam and luckily did well on it. The rest is history.

I took the exam in November of 1972, but wasn't offered job until October 1973 because President Nixon had imposed a government-wide hiring freeze. I was well up on the roster and when USIA finally got authority to hire again I was in its first post-freeze class of JOTs.

Q: You took the oral exam. Do you recall any of the questions or how it went at all?

PLOTKIN: At the time, I had shoulder length hair, waxed and twirled mustaches and a goatee. It was the Buffalo Bill look. I had dinner with friends the night before I was to take the oral and they said, "Couldn't you at least have gotten a hair cut."

In 1973, the exam was a one hour interview, not the day-long agony it's been for the last 20 years or more. I walked in and there were three men on my panel. One was an Italian American with a beard and an Italian Afro. Another was a black with a semi-Afro. The third was a clean-cut European. It was a relief.

I had prepared as best I could for the exam, partly by reading the newspapers leading up to the interview to make sure I was up to date on what was going on in the world. The first question they asked me had to do with the Euro dollar, an issue in the international economic news at the time, and I had an answer ready for that. We went on from there. I was experienced enough, perhaps because I was older than some other the applicants, to know when to say, I don't know. So when we got onto American culture and they asked

me about American dance I could honestly admit my ignorance beyond a few famous names. On the other hand, when they asked me to talk about American theater starting in 1950 I was able to say, "Well, you don't really want to start in 1950. We need to start a few years earlier than with *Death of a Salesman* and *Glass Menagerie* in the '40s. I scored a few points and we moved on from there.

Q: At that time were they looking for people for USIA or was this a general exam?

PLOTKIN: The exam was the same for State and USIA, but at the top of the first page of the exam there were five boxes and you were asked to check off the area in which you hoped to work, USIA or one of the four cones at State. I checked off USIA because my academic background was cultural as were my strongest interests. Even though my field was English literature, I knew a reasonable amount about American literature and history and I felt it was the logical and best fit for me.

Q: Had you ever prior to taking this exam run across an American diplomat?

PLOTKIN: Never.

Q: How about world events?

PLOTKIN: I was fairly active politically by the time I was in graduate school at UCLA. I was, for example, the lone political conservative on the UCLA's graduate student counsel in 1964-66. Each department sent one representative. In the counsel of 35 graduate students, thirty-three were liberals, one was a radical leftist, and I was on the right. The radical and I ended up writing joint op-ed pieces for the Daily Bruin chastising and castigating the liberals. While we disagreed on the solutions we agreed on the problems.

Q: How did you survive being the lone conservative?

PLOTKIN: I was involved, of course, in lots of heated political arguments, but UCLA in general and the English department in particular were not so intolerant politically as most campuses seem to be these days. Even I could be elected to represent their interests.

Q: Was there a strong Marxist group of professors?

PLOTKIN: They may have been, but politics were largely kept out of the classrooms. I would have to say that, in retrospect, while my assumption would be that most were left-of-center politically, I can not tell you with certainty what the politics of most of my professors in graduate school were. UCLA's approach to literature focused on textual analysis and historical criticism. As a result, contemporary politics did not impose itself on the analysis. In courses in literary criticism we were certainly expected to know how to apply Marxist criticism and other world views to a text, but it was an academic exercise, not a political imperative.

Q: What about deconstruction?

PLOTKIN: My good fortune is that deconstruction wasn't a major force before I left the profession, though it was beginning to make inroads. Scholars like Chomsky and others were already having an impact, but it hadn't really penetrated to most universities before I retired from the field in '72. I was fortunate to miss that. I think I would have been embattled had I stayed on, both politically and in terms of my academic approach to literature. I would also have had difficulty dealing with the approach to literature by the various ethnic and minority interest groups, who neglect the larger world and read literature with what, for me, is a too narrow point of view.

Q: When you were teaching, Black English and Black literature were considered the new wave. Was that something that you got involved in?

PLOTKIN: No. In my field, 16th and 17th century literature, ethnic and minority literature wasn't an issue. The few courses I taught in contemporary British and American literature were integrated in the sense that authors like Jane Austin, Ralph Ellison and Saul Bellow were part of the canon and we were certainly conscious of the fact that Austin was a woman, Ellison was writing about the American black experience and Bellow was writing about the American Jewish experience.

Q: How about gender studies?

PLOTKIN: Gender studies really didn't exist as a separate discipline in my day. I certainly had colleagues in the graduate school and at IU who were developing a feminist analytic approach to literature, but it hadn't come into full flower and there were no separate departments at UCLA for Black, Hispanic or feminist studies or any other special focus of that kind.

Q: Did you have any idea what you'd be doing when you joined the Foreign Service?

PLOTKIN: Only theoretically. I don't think any of us who aren't Foreign Service brats or spouses become FSOs knowing much about what really goes on in an embassy. One of my criticisms of the A100 class was that it ought to take place after JOTs serve a six month internship in the field. They could then return to Washington able to ask some really hard questions. In our ignorance we really couldn't.

Q: You started in '73. What was your A100 class like?

PLOTKIN: I joined the Foreign Service on October 23, 1973. The new USIA officers had a month of USIA training in advance of joining the State A100 class in November. There were ten of us in the USIA class, well mixed. Among us were two women, one each African, Hispanic, Chinese and Japanese Americans, two Jews and two WASPs.

Q: How did you get your first assignment?

PLOTKIN: Because the hiring freeze, it had been a couple of years since anyone had gone out in the field as a JOT, Junior Officer Trainee. We had been told that the USG divided the world into six geographical areas. USIA had identified two embassies in each of the geographic areas as potential posts for new JOTS, a dozen posts in all, and said to us, "See if you can work it out among you as to where you want to go." All they required was that at least one of us go to each of the six regions.

Everything fell into place. Our one Latino had grown up in Fort Wayne. Coincidently, his brother had been one of my students. He spoke almost no Spanish and very much wanted to go to Latin America. He got assigned to one of the Spanish-speaking countries but, ironically, at the last minute was switched to Brazil. We had a former Peace Corps guy who had served in Latin America and who wanted to go back, so that took care of Latin America. The Chinese and Japanese Americans really wanted to learn those languages. That took care of Asia where there were two openings, in Taiwan and in Tokyo. One of the women was the wife of a State Department officer who was stationed in Cyprus so she went to a job in Cyprus. The one black woman in the class wanted to go to Africa, so she got her choice of the two African posts. I had my eye on a couple of places, but I was able to hang back, watch the process evolve and play the good guy. Finally, I had to choose among Nairobi, Tehran and Warsaw. All of them were, at that point, rather attractive posts, although had I gone to Tehran I probably would have been there to become a hostage.

My choice was clear. My grandfather had been a wanted man in Poland, smuggled out of the country. I wanted to go back two generations later with a diplomatic passport. A nice circle to close. So, I picked Warsaw and went on to struggle with Polish.

Q: How did the meshing of the USIA officers and the rest of the Foreign Service go?

PLOTKIN: In our A100 class, it worked very well. Of course the major meshing for me was that I met Ruth Hansen, my future wife, in the A100 course, another enormous stroke of good fortune. My USIA classmates and I went to the old FSI building in Rosslyn to join the State Department officers and those from other agencies who were in the A100 course. They had already met for a day or two before the USIA gang joined them. I got on the elevator with one of my USIA colleagues. As Ruth, who was at the back of the elevator, described it to me later, he and I got on and instead of doing what we were supposed to do - shut up and watch the numbers - we just kept talking and joking away. She thought to herself, "These must be the USIA people."

Q: Have you kept up with any of them?

PLOTKIN: I've kept up with several. Even early on, our A100 class partied every weekend and many of us played softball on the mall on Sundays. Today, there are several with whom we are in regular contact. Almost all are retired or on the verge of retirement. Ruth and I hosted a couple of reunions over the years and will host another in late 2006.

Q: How well do you feel that the A100 course prepared you?

PLOTKIN: As I said before, the real problem wasn't the quality of the presentations, although they varied widely, it was that they were addressed to people who by and large really didn't know what they were getting into. Most of us had never been in an embassy. After all, if you're a tourist overseas you only go to an embassy if you're mugged or lose your passport or are broke. Otherwise you don't have anything to do with the embassy. We really weren't prepared to intelligently absorb much of what we were being told. As I said before, I think having a six month internship somewhere prior to coming back for the A100 course would dramatically improve the amount that we would take away from it.

Q: Did you and your future wife begin to court during the A100 course? For the record, I started this morning to interview Ruth Hansen, so if you want to compare stories, you might find a he said, she said thing.

PLOTKIN: I was interested from the minute I saw her, but she was dating someone else, not in the Foreign Service, and I already knew I was going to Warsaw and not inclined to get involved seriously with anybody. But Ruth and I spent a lot of time together. We both lived on Capitol Hill and carpooled with two of our other A100 classmates to Rosslyn for the A100 course and later for language training. Ruth and I play bridge and had a regular bridge game with a couple of our classmates. And we both played in our group's Sunday softball games. We did have a couple of dates before she went off for her first assignment in the Dominican Republic and I went off to Warsaw.

Q: You took Polish for how long?

PLOTKIN: I only had six months of Polish before they sent me out. At that point USIA only gave the abbreviated hard language courses to JOTs, not the full 44 weeks. I found it very difficult. I hadn't studied Latin or any other declined language and had no Slavic language background. Polish is fully declined. When I learned that there were 12 ways to form the nominative plural I really mentally shrugged and reconciled myself to putting a schwa at the end of each word and faking it as best I could. I'm not proud of it, but that's more or less what I did. But I got by. I was in Warsaw from July, 1974 to July 1976, and then spent just over a year in Poznan.

Q: How were relations between Poland and the United States when you got there in '74?

PLOTKIN: On every official level, not very good. The Cold War was still very cold. All of our phones were bugged. They would occasionally accidentally cross the wires; you could pick up your phone and hear a conversation in someone else's living room where the phone was not off the hook. We were microwaved. And, of course, the strain in our relations had a significant impact on what USIA and other Embassy programs could achieve.

Q: Explain what microwaved is.

PLOTKIN: As I recall, it was a surveillance method in common use in Warsaw Pact countries. It worked through the broadcast of microwaves into our facilities. I'm not sure of the science, but we were, of course, concerned about both the security and health issues involved. No one wanted to live or work in a microwave oven. I was also followed fairly frequently. Sometimes it was very obvious, as if they wanted you to know that you were being watched. Sometimes I'm sure it was much more subtle. They also tried to use our Polish contacts as sources of intelligence.

At least on one occasion when we were in Poznan, a researcher we began to know well dropped out of our lives. I had occasion to run into her casually some months later and she confirmed what we suspected. If she wanted to continue to see us, she would have to report our meetings to the authorities on the next morning after every occasion. Since she was absolutely opposed to doing so, she felt that as a matter of her personal integrity she had to give us up. Of course that meant to us that anyone who did come to dinner - and many people did - came with the knowledge that they knew that we knew that they were going the next morning to report to the police on whatever conversations we had.

Q: Who was your ambassador?

PLOTKIN: It was Richard Davies the entire three years I was there.

Q: What sort of work did you do at the Embassy?

PLOTKIN: In Warsaw I was the assistant cultural attaché and had a typically wide variety of responsibilities for a medium-sized post. I did everything from supervising the library, to managing cultural presentations, to being the main contact for all of the Fulbright and International Visitors grantees. All under the general tutelage of the CAO, Bob Gosende. I was the guy American Fulbright grantees came to when they had a problem with anything from travel to accommodations to academic relations to difficulties with the Ministry of Education. I often traveled to Polish universities in the Warsaw consular area; once I was in Poznan as branch PAO, I continued the same work in western Poland.

In Poznan I also worked with local and regional media - as much as you could work with the media in Poland in those years. There really wasn't much we could do. The media were thoroughly controlled from Warsaw except regarding local cultural issues. If we had a cultural exhibit to open or a concert to present, we could place stories about that. In no way could we be heard on political or security issues. The U.S. view on the virtues of the stealth bomber was never heard by Poles. That would simply never to make it into print or on the air. You could talk to the editor of the newspaper or the head of a television station about issues and he might even respond sympathetically in private, but officially, there was no impact.

Q: Did you feel that the Poles were keeping an eye on big brother to the east, that they

really felt differently than the Soviets toward the west?

PLOTKIN: On every level but the most official. The 1970s were the period of Polish jokes in the United States and the Poles found them highly offensive. At the same time, the typical joke in Poland was either anti-Russian or designed to make the Russians look dumb and barbaric. My favorite has a Pole given the opportunity to shoot a Russian and a German and asked which he'll do first. He says, "The German of course." Why? "Business before pleasure." They really thought of the Russians as barbaric oppressors.

Many of the people I worked with were members of the communist party, but for basic career reasons only. If you were a university professor of chemistry and wanted to see Western chemical journals or travel to an international conference, you had to be a party member. Those who joined under such circumstances were no more communist than you or I. For them, party membership was simply a license to be a professional; you couldn't be a successful professional if you were outside the party.

Q: I've talked to people and interviewed people who were there around that time. One said he was quite convinced that there were at least three dedicated Marxists in Poland.

PLOTKIN: Maybe four, but none in the government. One was the young scholar who refused to see us once she knew that she had to report our meetings to the police. She'd earned her Ph.D. from either Boston University or Boston College. She was a committed communist, socialist might be the better description, but she hated the Polish government. She found it entirely corrupt and a betrayal of the true principles of socialism.

I was fortunate to be in Poland during the uprising of 1976. The trigger was an increase in the price of food and other basic commodities, but it really demonstrated many of the failures of the system, both political and economic. While the riots were suppressed, there was one key outcome, the formation of KOR. I can no longer translate the acronym, but KOR was an association of intellectuals who came together to support the workers' demonstrations, especially those at the locomotive factory in Radom. They somehow managed to continue to exist and later became the intellectual core of Solidarity.

Q: Where was the uprising?

PLOTKIN: The largest and most dramatic demonstrations place in at the Gdansk shipyards and Radom locomotive factory, but there were demonstrations throughout the country. Prices were going up, living was difficult, and there was an increasing demand for freedom.

Q: Did you get any feel for the role of the Catholic Church?

PLOTKIN: Very much so. In 1974-76, I was in frequent contact with the Catholic University of Lublin, the only non-state, non-communist university in Poland. I was also fortunate to be involved in the opening of our consulate in Krakow in the summer of 1974

which was attended by Karol Wojtila, later Pope John Paul II. It was very clear that most of the opposition at that time was centered in the Catholic Church. It was the one place where you could speak freely to some degree and by being a member of the church show that you were not fully participating in the communist rule. Active membership could put a damper on your career, so for some, practicing their Catholicism was not a simple decision.

Q: Did you encounter any anti-Semitism while you were there?

PLOTKIN: Unfortunately, yes. Not to my face, but I had Embassy colleagues tell me they'd heard Poles speak to the effect that Hitler was really terrible, "but at least he solved our Jewish problem." I think my name probably identified me as a Jew. That's how it was.

Q: Was the embassy engaged with the younger generation of Poles or did we believe them even more deeply indoctrinated than the older generation?

PLOTKIN: We were certainly looking to what we were then calling the successor generation for change, though the young were not undivided. The less educated and the more rural, the more conservative they were in their behavior and the more likely they were to accept the status quo and try simply to survive within it. On the other hand, most of our contacts were among the university educated and we had a substantial, not huge, but a substantial Fulbright program and other outreach programs designed to reach out to faculty and students. These were people ready for change.

The Fulbright program was designed to reach a wide spectrum of professions; we sent about 50 Polish grantees each year to the U.S., half post-doctoral and professional grantees, half graduate students. Had we allowed it, the Polish government would have sent grantees in the fields of science and technology only, but we insisted that 50% of the grants go to people in the social sciences and humanities. Every year the Ministry of Education would send us a science and technology laden slate of nominees. There was, of course, no open competition under the communists. Applicants had to apply through their universities or ministries to the ministry of education, which cleared all applicants through the ministries of interior and foreign affairs. The first slate we received never had enough nominees in humanities and social sciences to reach 50% even had we accepted every one nominated, and some of them hadn't adequate English. We interviewed every candidate to judge their ability to succeed in at a U.S. university and to make certain that their level of English was adequate for study in the U.S.

Every year, we would respond by sending the Ministry of Education a list of successful candidates. Our list always included the top 25 nominees in the fields of science and technology, plus alternates, and those nominees in social sciences and humanities deemed qualified. That list never came to 25. So we told them, here are the nominees we've approved in social sciences and humanities. Because we couldn't identify 25 qualified nominees, some grants will go unfilled unless you have other candidates. After bitching

and moaning about it for a while, the Ministry would finally send us a supplementary list and we would complete the roster and send it off to the U.S. for the placement of the grantees in U.S. universities.

Q: Did you find that every second Pole had a relative in the United States? I was told there were more Poles in Chicago than in any Polish city except Warsaw. This must have had an influence.

PLOTKIN: If nothing else, it meant that those Poles who did get tourist visas could always get a temporary job in the U.S. and return better off than they left. It was very difficult for Poles to get passports from the Polish government. Since so few could get passports to begin with, the burden on the non-immigrant visa section of the consular section was limited. They only had to interview that lucky few applying for visas to put in those passports. On the other hand, the consular section was very busy supporting American citizens of Polish origin visiting Poland from the United States. Just two weeks before I arrived on July 15, 1974, Poland opened up travel within Poland for embassy personnel. With the obvious exception of off-limits military installations, we could travel anywhere in the country. We might be followed, or course, but were rarely stopped. This was also a signal to Americans of Polish background some of whom felt for the first time that they could afford to try to visit. The consular section also kept busy with U.S. Social Security recipients. Because Poland's cost of living was low if you had a dollar income, some 6,000 Social Security had retired there.

Q: Did the Polish security apparatus not only in following you, but assign girls to you or use any other methods to entrap you?

PLOTKIN: We were warned about this possibility before we went to Poland. I went there a bachelor, but if there was ever an attempt to compromise me along those lines, I was oblivious to it. It was a disappointment. The Embassy did have a non-fraternization policy in place and almost all of us followed the rule, but in at least on case I was aware of, the Department chose to ignore it. One of our officers had a romance with, and ultimately married, a Polish violinist and did so without any damage to his career. In fact, I don't recall knowing of any attempts at entrapment while I was there. There harassments including occasional break-ins in people's homes, but not in mine. Often they didn't bother to make it seem a burglary. They wanted you to know they'd been there, searching through your belongings. Of course, we were all subject to the general surveillance apparatus.

Q: What was bachelor life like for you there?

PLOTKIN: I will spare you details, but I quickly adopted the attitude that if they couldn't blackmail you for it, there was no need to pay much attention to the surveillance. More to the point, Western male bachelors were in demand in Warsaw. All the Western embassies had non-fraternization policies and there were more western single Foreign Service professional women than men in Warsaw.

Q: How was USIA was used and treated at the embassy?

PLOTKIN: We were the envy of the Embassy because of our range of contacts and our ability to get out of the building more often than others could. I spent a lot of time on the street, talking to people at the universities, talking to people in the media, talking to people on trains and in theaters. I don't know really what the percentage was, but I believe we did a high percentage of the political reporting because we had such good contacts.

Q: Were there any contacts with the Soviets at that time?

PLOTKIN: Hardly any. When I was PAO in Poznan we were given permission by the studio to host a private showing of the movie "The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming." In 1976, there were only two diplomatic establishments in Poznan, the Russians and us. Of course I invited the Russians to come to the movie, but they didn't.

Q: Actually, the film was very sympathetic to both sides.

PLOTKIN: A liberal's dream of a U.S.-Soviet love fest, but the Poles were not fooled. The movie is about a Russian submarine that runs aground in New England. In one of the subplots, there's a romance between a young Russian submariner and an American girl. I had a Polish audience of about 60 for this movie. At its end, the Russian submariner is back on his ship, waving goodbye to his American sweetheart saying, "I'll be back." The Polish audience roared with laughter. They weren't fooled by American sentimentality. They knew that the sailor would be lucky to avoid Siberia and that he sure as hell wasn't coming back to the United States. It was an interesting and telling moment.

We did talk with the Soviets when we were together on more-or-less neutral territory, receptions and parties, but always let our colleagues know so as to avoid the possible perception of being compromised. We kept whatever eye on them we could I suppose, but there was virtually no socializing; all the contacts were incidental or official.

Q: Did you get any feel for Polish academia? What were your impressions?

PLOTKIN: Academically, the Poles were very sound. USIS - actually the Press and Culture section in those days - hosted many programs in American literature, American studies and English as a second language and gave material support for programs in these fields at the Polish universities. Also, many of our exchanges, Fulbright and International Visitors grants, were in these fields. We had a regional English language teaching officer at the Embassy who worked closely with Polish university counterparts. We also placed many of our junior Fulbrighters, usually with master's degrees in ESL, at Polish universities. When we brought Americans in other fields, from economics to the sciences, to Polish universities, they were welcomed. Finally, all of the Polish grantees, whether in chemistry or literature, place in U.S. universities proved to be academic stars.

Q: What were your impressions about what the Poles were learning about the United States and American studies?

PLOTKIN: There was an enormous amount of interest in the U.S., and almost everybody listened to or tried to listen to Voice of America and other Western international radio broadcasts. The best known American in Poland was VOA's Music USA host Willis Conover. We knew that if they were listening to him they could and almost certainly would listen to VOA broadcasts of news of the world and news of Poland on RFE.

In addition, public interest was shown by the crowds at our public events. Concerts and exhibits drew large audiences. Those were the days of major U.S. exhibits including, in 1976, the U.S. bicentennial exhibit that toured just four European cities, Warsaw, Rome London, and Paris. One room in the exhibit was dedicated to honoring the involvement in the American Revolution of citizens of each country in which the exhibit appeared. In Warsaw, it was focused on Polish American relations with emphasis on Generals Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski. There were huge crowds of course.

At the same time, the image of the U.S. held by many Poles was based factors we at the Embassy, USIA and State couldn't control. It was based on a combination of the wide availability of American pop culture – TV, movies and pop music – and the propaganda endlessly repeated by the highly controlled Polish media. Everybody was happy to wear jeans, but everybody also knew how badly we mistreated the Native American population and had an even worse view than reality of African-American and white relations in the United States. As bad as our problems were, and we never denied their existence, the way they were presented in Polish media made it seem as if we were literally at war with each other.

Q: Was there any feeling about whether war between the west and the Warsaw Pact was imminent and about how the Poles would react if it happened?

PLOTKIN: I don't think most Poles believed a war in Europe was imminent. They were, or course, aware of and concerned by the proxy wars and engagements in which we, the Soviets and our client states were involved and were certainly against our involvement in Vietnam. There was some sense that, were war to come to Europe again, most Poles would be disinclined to fight on the side of the Warsaw Pact.

Probably the most remarkable thing that happened while I was there was that Richard Nixon was forced out of office. Most Poles couldn't believe that it happened. Because he was an anti-communist, most felt that he was on their side against the Russians and doing the right stuff in foreign policy. Vietnam not withstanding, Poles not committed to their government's point of view approved of Nixon's foreign policies. On the other hand, they weren't deeply concerned with or well informed about U.S. internal politics, including the Watergate investigations. They really couldn't believe that the president who they thought was probably the most powerful man in the world could be forced out of office. Why

didn't he just call up the military and stop all of this nonsense?

Of course we interpreted the fall of President Nixon to our advantage by pointing out that while he was forced to resign, basically nothing bad happened as a result. Our foreign policy didn't change. The military didn't take charge of the government. There was a smooth transition to the Ford presidency and normal elections in 1776. Things simply returned to normal. Where else in the world could this sort of thing happen?

Q: How different was it working in Poznan?

PLOTKIN: Fortunately the PAO held me on a rather long leash. I had been at bottom of the embassy's hierarchy in Warsaw, but Poznan was a post of only four FSOs, three of us on our first tours, responsible for representing the U.S. to all of Western Poland, a population of roughly 11,000,000. What that meant was that I was able to travel throughout that part of the country almost whenever I wanted to; we had an adequate travel budget and I had a government car, so I covered everything from the mountains in the South to the Baltic in the North. More importantly, I also had resources to create programs. Further, because there were only four of us, we all covered for each other. On a couple of occasions, I did consular work; whenever I traveled by car, I noted how high the corn was and reported to the Ag Attaché; I delivered checks to social security annuitants; and wherever I went, I called on the governor, paid my respects and talked about current issues. As I said, everybody did everything. It was really great opportunity.

Q: Did you pick up any sense of the nature of relations between the communist East Germans and the Poles?

PLOTKIN: It really wasn't much different from Polish-German relations in general. I'm sure that most Poles felt that the East German communists no better than other Germans and Germans by and large were not beloved. End of story.

Q: Were you in the Poznan Fair? It was a big deal at that time, one of only two such events that opened up that part of Eastern Europe to some extent.

PLOTKIN: I worked at the Fairs in 1976 and '77. It was a big deal and a lot of American firms participated. Our pavilion attracted a great many fair visitors and we were able to get good media coverage. The Polish government saw the Fair as of great enough technological and economic potential for them to ignore its political impact and to acknowledge our presence there and the importance of the U.S. pavilion. Media stories often featured U.S. technology or industrial equipment that the Poles hoped to acquire. From the U.S. point of view, sales of equipment and potential for investment depended on the Polish budget and those of other Warsaw pact countries. That meant that the Fair was probably never really successfully in purely economic terms, but it was a very good showcase for us.

Q: In your travels in Poland, did you ever run into spontaneous examples of interest in or

love for the United States?

PLOTKIN: Americans, who, after all, never invaded or bombed Poland, were widely liked and the United States seen as a land of opportunity. I'll give one example. When I was in Krakow on TDY in 1974, several of us hiked up to a lovely little lake in the Tatras Mountains called Morski Oko, the eye of the sea. Legend has it that water from the lake flows under Poland all the way to the Baltic. I was the only Polish speaker in the group. It was winter; snow covered the ground. At the lake, dined on bigos and beer at the little inn there, and decided to take a horse drawn sleigh down the mountain. As I said earlier, my Polish was not very good, but it was up to me to negotiate with the mountain guide about our trip down the mountain. When I began to speak to him, he spat on the ground and answered me in German. My accent must have sounded like German to him. I immediately explained to him that we were Americans. Instead of throwing us off the side of the mountain, he sang folk songs all the way. I had many similar experiences.

Q: You married in 1976. Give me your version about how that came about. I'll get the real story later from Ruth.

PLOTKIN: Ruth and I exchanged occasional letters between Santo Domingo and Warsaw. In fall 1975, she finished her tour there, was assigned to Washington, and decided to take several weeks of vacation to visit friends in Europe. I will try to state the facts without interpretation. The first stop on her ticket was Warsaw. She was scheduled to continue on to visit an A100 classmate of ours in Belgrade, a friend in Southern France, and return to Washington.

She originally planned to arrive a week before Thanksgiving, but I got a cable from her saying she was ill and had to postpone her trip for about one week. Calling to or from Warsaw was nearly impossible in those days. If you placed a call, you'd be lucky to get the call put through in three or four hours and then even luckier if you weren't cut off mid-sentence and forced to start all over again, if you could get the call placed again. Except for cable traffic, there was no sure or quick way to communicate with anyone in the United States. Anyway, my reaction to the cable was stronger than I would have anticipated. I was dismayed.

Ruth finally arrived the day before Thanksgiving. I met her at the airport. Fireworks went off and a symphony orchestra struck up. After she'd been in Warsaw a few days, I asked her if she could spend her entire vacation with me. She agreed and cabled the others she'd planned to visit saying she'd changed her plans. A week or so later we went to dinner at SPATIF, the restaurant of the Union of Theater and Film Workers. After a couple of vodkas, I proposed and to my great relief, she said yes. Ruth flew back to the States on January 1, 1976. I had home leave scheduled beginning January 15. We were married on February 28. I returned, alone, to Poland on March 15.

It was the start of a difficult two year period during which our careers kept us apart for three long stretches, about a year in all. For openers, Ruth had stay in her new assignment

at least until the 1976 summer assignment cycle before being granted leave without pay. She then spent a year with me in Poznan, a year that she thought was going to be difficult because she had always either been in school or in a job. Now she was coming to a Polish city, not knowing what she was going to do with herself. It worked out well. She took a couple of graduate courses by correspondence, took part in a Polish language program for foreign non-speakers at Poznan University, took piano lessons for the first time in years, and traveled with me all around western Poland. It was a lovely honeymoon year despite the hardships of living in Poland.

Q: What in your understanding were the rules of marrying Foreign Service Officers?

PLOTKIN: Luckily we married after the rules were changed and women Foreign Service Officers were no longer forced to resign upon marrying. The rule changed in '71 and we married five years later. We were among the early tandem couples, but not, or course, among the very first.

I was due to leave Poland in September, 1977; Ruth's year of leave-without-pay ended in mid-July. We needed tandem onward assignments. Because Ruth was a political officer who had, as was the norm, spent her first tour doing consular work, our main goal for our first assignment together was to get her into a political officer's slot that didn't require a new language for her. Since the only foreign language in which she was fluent was Spanish - she was 4/4 at least in Spanish - we only looked at English and Spanish speaking posts. That's how we ended up in Panama where there were jobs for both of us. We were there from 1977 to '80 and participated in giving away the canal.

Q: What was it like in Panama in '77?

PLOTKIN: We were there at a very good time in U.S.-Panamanian relations. We arrived shortly after General Torrijos and President Carter signed the Panama Canal Treaties, but before either country had ratified them. Panama held a plebiscite on the treaty in October 1997. There was never much doubt about the outcome. What was most significant was that Torrijos, probably under pressure from President Carter, legalized the political parties historically active in Panama, but suppressed earlier under his rule. They were invited to participate in the debate on the treaty. We helped monitor the plebiscite which went smoothly. Panamanians overwhelmingly voted in favor of the treaty.

There was real doubt as to whether the U.S. Senate would ratify it. The first six months we were in Panama, 44 members of the U.S. Senate, assorted members of the House, veterans of foreign wars and John Wayne, a buddy of Torrijos, all appeared on the Embassy's doorstep. We developed a very well organized dog and pony show for our visitors. They met Panamanians for and against and Americans for and against. They met the heads of the Canal Zone and of SOUTHCOM, our Canal Zone military. They often met Torrijos and the head of the Archbishop of Panama. They all got a helicopter tour of the canal. We took turns acting as their escorts. Ruth and I had no children yet, so were able to enjoy the excitement. It's impossible to know whether the Embassy had any

influence on the Senate vote, but the treaty barely got the two-thirds majority it needed to pass the Senate. If we changed one vote to yes, we did make a difference.

Q: Who was our ambassador?

PLOTKIN: We served two political appointees: William Jordan and Ambler Moss.

Q: Was there concern on the part of the officers at the embassy about whether the Panamanians would be able to run the canal?

PLOTKIN: Most of us were convinced they could. We all knew Panamanians in a variety of professions, knew they were well qualified, and knew that Panama had many people capable of running a complex institution. We also knew that they had the will to do so, an interest in proving themselves, and of course a huge economic interest in the Canal. It remains, after all, the country's main source of foreign currency. By and large it was my impression that we could honestly tell the visiting Senators, many of whom were concerned about this, that the transfer could take place successfully and the U.S. shipping would not be at risk. The Panamanians have succeeded. The issue now is whether to try to widen the canal to accommodate modern larger ships.

Q: How was Torrijos?

PLOTKIN: He was interesting man. The consensus at the embassy was that if he held free and fair elections and ran for the presidency he would win. He wasn't, of course, popular among the old oligarchy that had run the country before him and has run it since Noriega's departure. However, he had a deep political base among the people in general. Economically, Panama was doing well and Torrijos did a lot to integrate government, bringing in people who were not from the European-ancestry elite. Indians, Blacks and Asians were able to compete for important jobs in government for the first time. It was a terrible shock to Panama when his airplane flew into a mountainside a couple of years after we left Panama.

Q: What was your job in Panama?

PLOTKIN: I was a jack of all trades. There were four USIS officers: a PAO, CAO, IO, and a program officer. I was the most junior of the gang and served as program officer. I ran the professional and academic exchange programs; managed the speaker programs, and dealt with human rights issues. I also backed-up everybody else and, for example, was acting CAO for six months of my tour.

Q: Was there much academic exchanges?

PLOTKIN: We didn't fund many academic exchanges, but a lot of Panamanians went to the States for college educations at their own expense. Notre Dame and LSU were high on the list of schools attended. Accordingly, we did a lot of academic advising, helping

Panamanians find the best fit among American universities, helping them with admission and scholarship applications, etc. Our major problem, which we never solved, was that the best of those who couldn't afford a U.S. education were often offered and accepted scholarships to study in Cuba. The U.S. government had decided not to compete for these people, to our regret.

Q: I would have thought relations between the embassy and the Zone were rather tense since many Zonians believed the State Department was giving away their country.

PLOTKIN: There were three centers of American authority in Panama: SOUTHCOM, the military command; the Canal Zone and its government; and the Embassy. On paper, the Embassy had the lead. There were regular meetings at a variety of levels of representatives of the three organizations, including a meeting at least once a month among the three public affairs officers, working to make sure that the messages we were giving the Panamanians weren't contradictory and were at least complimentary. We did not always succeed, but by and large it worked out pretty well.

Obviously, the Americans in the Canal Zone did not want to give up control of that strip of land and water and made that clear to anyone who would listen, directly to the Senators who came to Panama and to the U.S.G., working through their families in the U.S.

Q: Did you have to beat off attacks by American conservatives about the treaty?

PLOTKIN: Of course. Ronald Reagan said something like, "We built it, we own it, it is ours." Certainly the American right was among the most vocally opposed to giving away the canal. It was a hot issue, but it didn't survive the reality of the transfer. As you know, President Reagan died recently. I watched a lot of the TV coverage and in the media I saw there was never a mention of the Panama Canal treaty, pro or con. I think that's because once the battle over ratification was over, and the treaties went into effect and it was clear that ships would continue to transit the canal without problem, the American right and everyone else forgot about it. It became non-issue almost immediately.

Q: Were you running into what later got to be a rather septic situation with Noriega, anti-Americanism and all that?

PLOTKIN: We did see anti-Americanism on the Panamanian far left, centered largely at the University of Panama which harbored a hard core of communist students. Every once in a while, students would spot an outsider's car on the campus, burn it, and dance the usual 'Yankees Go Home' ritual. It happened to our DCM's car. All this would upset my mother who would see it on television in Los Angeles, call and ask whether we were okay. At least on one such occasion we didn't even know there had been a demonstration at the university. The demonstrations typically involved no more that a few hundred students, but the television cameras would zoom in and could make it look like thousands. It was so much a local, University of Panama event that it had almost no impact on anyone other than the car's owner. Soccer games were more significant.

Another aspect of U.S.-Panamanian relations we frequently encountered involved the human rights. Panamanian activists, encouraged by President Carter's human rights policies, were pressing Torrijos for greater democracy. Torrijos was, after all, a military dictator even if, by 1977, he was about as benign a military dictator as you can imagine. The Embassy was often put in a situation that can only be called ironic. Activists were saying in the same breath, we don't want the United States to interfere in Panama, but can you please help us get rid of Torrijos.

Anti-Americanism surged with the U.S. invasion and imprisonment of Noriega, but the relationship is improving under the current Panamanian government.

Q: What was going on in the rest of Central America at that time? Later, during the Reagan's tenure in the early '80s it became quite nasty.

PLOTKIN: It was a dramatic time in the region with problems ranging from the Jim Jones mass suicide in Guyana - people from our embassy ended up going there to help clean up the mess - to the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua which drove Somoza from office. We were also aware of events brewing in Guatemala and El Salvador. At one point, Ruth and I briefly hosted Malcolm Barnebey, later our first ambassador to Belize. He was on his way through Panama to Nicaragua to convince Somoza that it was time for him to leave.

Although it was not directly related to U.S. relations with Central American, we also had the Shah of Iran in residence while we were in Panama. After the Shah visited the United States for cancer treatment, he was invited by Torrijos to come to Panama for sanctuary. He ended up spending several months on a resort island in the Bay of Panama, continuing medical treatment for the cancer that ultimately killed him after he went to Cairo. One night when I was acting information officer, I got a phone call at about 2200 from a radio station in Chicago asking whether it was true that the Panamanians were about to extradite the Shah back to Iran. Of course I had heard nothing of this and all I could do was to claim ignorance and say that I would inquire and I call back.

I called Ambassador Moss who said there was nothing to the story. I called the Panamanian president's spokesperson; he, too, said nothing's happening. I called the Shah's press attaché who also said there's nothing to it. Meanwhile, my phone rang nonstop from 10:00 that evening until 10:00 the next morning with calls from all around the United States, from Ireland and beyond. All I could tell them was that as far as I could determine from talking to the responsible offices in Panama, nothing was going on. "How do we know you're telling the truth?" I could only respond that, "If Panama extradites him, you'll know I'm either misinformed or lying. If they don't extradite him, you'll know I'm telling the truth. All I can tell you is what these people have told me."

It turned out not to be so simple. A year later, I think it was in 1981, after we returned to Washington, Pierre Salinger had a television special in which he reported that the

Panamanians had been very close to extraditing the Shah. Apparently, the Iranians' side blew it. Iran and Panama had an agreement that would have sent the extradition request to the Panamanian courts. Their decision could have led to the Shah's extradition to Iran. But part of the agreement was that the two governments were to make simultaneous announcements of the agreement. The Iranians jumped the gun and the Panamanians told them to stuff it. At least that's the story as I understand it.

Q: Although it wasn't your particular bailiwick I assume working with the media in Panama was very different than in Warsaw. Was there a free press?

PLOTKIN: It was a free press and an often undisciplined and irresponsible press. We spent a lot of time deciding whether to ignore stories and let them just die of their own lack of substance or whether to craft a response. President Carter's human rights policies led, in part, to the freedom enjoyed by the Panamanian media. Part of what Torrijos promised in return for the treaties was reinstatement of the political parties and a greater freedom of the media. It created an opportunity for both Ruth and me because our responsibilities overlapped. Within the political section, she was responsible for dealing with the newly liberated political parties and the human rights activists. As part of my USIS portfolio I covered the same territory.

Q: Was there much in the way of human rights problems?

PLOTKIN: Not dramatic ones, but when you live under a military dictatorship, however mild, there are limits on what you think you can say and do without risk. There weren't lots of political prisoners or overt instances of repression.

Q: One thinks of Latin America and liberation theology. Was that an active force there?

PLOTKIN: It had no significant presence, because unlike most of the countries where it was a vital factor, Panama was becoming increasingly democratic and there was no Panamanian insurgency. The country is, of course, largely Catholic. The Archbishop was a very good contact of the Embassy and was highly admired by most Panamanians. There was real freedom of religion in Panama; its Protestant and Jewish communities were thriving. Basically it was a very tolerant society. I remember being in the mountain town of El Valle, a place we would retreat to for a cool breeze. At a restaurant there was a large extended family at lunch. There must have been 20 people. Among them were people of Asian, African and European descent. When the family's grandfather stood up, he looked like my grandfather. There was a lot of intermarriage. As I said, a liberal and tolerant society.

Q: Were the Soviets and Cubans messing around there?

PLOTKIN: It was a time when they were active in many places in the region and they had a presence in Panama. There was a degree of contact and cooperation between Torrijos and Castro, but it was nothing compared to the Soviet and Cuban involvement in

Nicaragua and some other Latin American countries. As I mentioned earlier, the Cubans were a real presence on the educational scene.

Q: Anything else we should cover on your time in Panama?

PLOTKIN: The main event of our personal lives was the birth there of our older daughter, Anya. She has the right to run for the Panamanian presidency if she likes, but she hasn't been back since we left when she was eleven months old.

From Panama, we came back to Washington in summer 1980. I worked in the American Republics Office at the USIA on the Mexico and Central America desk until 1983, and later was a program manager in the Arts America Office. Ruth came back to a job in EB dealing with Eastern Europe, took a second year of leave-without-pay after the birth of our second daughter, Alison, in November 1981, and then returned to a tour in EUR.

Q: A hell of a lot was going on in Central America then, wasn't it?

PLOTKIN: I was often at the State Department and occasionally down in the territory. It was the time of the Contras vs. the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, Mexico's currency collapse, and implementation of the canal treaties.

Q: Let's talk about Central America first. I've always had a hard time quite visualizing what the desk officer in USIA did. USIA was off to one side it seemed at that time.

PLOTKIN: Not so. In AR, certainly, we were in the thick of it. USIA always gave primacy to the field. My job was to provide our USIS officers in Central America and Mexico the resources they needed to support US policy goals. That included assistance with media placement, including the first WordNet broadcasts, professional and cultural exchanges, keeping the PAOs and their staffs up to date on the U.S. media, briefing State officers going out to the field, and more. The first thing I did every day was read the NY Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Christian Science Monitor and Miami Herald and put together appropriate materials for the PAOs. I briefed them by phone before they met with the ambassador each morning.

AR also had, for the first time. a number of computers available. In an office of about 30 people, there were three work stations. One of my most dramatic moments came when I was told on Monday morning that by Wednesday evening a huge briefing book for the USIA Director had to be ready because he was going to a regional PAO meeting. I'd never touched a computer in my life and thought word processing a vile phrase. You processed tuna, not words. But I was desperate and to a computer I turned. With the help of a secretary and an intern, by Wednesday evening I was as good a word processor as anybody in the building. When I made a mistake, I yelled for help and learned what to do. It was a fascinating experience and I was hooked.

Q: In '81, what were the public affairs officers doing, particularly in places like

Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras?

PLOTKIN: Most of their work focused on dealing with the local, U.S., and, sometimes, international media. It varied widely depending on the situation in each country and the degree to which each was in the media spotlight. Guatemala, Nicaragua and El Salvador were always in the news, Panama occasionally, Costa Rica almost never, Belize never.

The rest of their work varied enormously in response to local needs and ease of access by the local population to our embassies. It was a time that saw the beginning of tightening of public access to our embassy facilities. In Panama, where the USIS office was a couple of kilometers away from the chancery, and in Costa Rica, our offices were open to the public without restriction. In Guatemala and San Salvador, our embassies were fortress-like. Despite these differences, all had libraries, and all had outreach programs to local universities and education and professional exchange programs, hosted cultural presentations, distributed the wireless file, and the like.

Q: How about Nicaragua? The Sandinistas had already taken control, hadn't they? Could you still carry on an active program there?

PLOTKIN: They took control towards the end of our tour in Panama. As a result, our ability to carry out programs there was very limited. At the onset of Sandinista rule there was a brief honeymoon, especially as they recognized that we played a positive role in advising Somoza to leave. But the honeymoon didn't last very long. Sandinista repression of dissent and political alignment with Cuba, and later its recognition that we were supporting the opposition Contra movement, led inevitably to restrictions on what our Embassy could do. Nevertheless, we never broke relations with or were forced out of Nicaragua.

Q: I imagine their newspapers and media were difficult to penetrate.

PLOTKIN: It was a situation not unlike that in Communist Poland. A totalitarian regime is a totalitarian regime. They may not be identical to each other, but they share a set of priorities and one is to control information. The media were controlled by the state and that meant that objective reporting was rare and news depicting the U.S. in positive terms was unavailable and impossible to place.

Q: Did you find that we often had a problem in dealing with a hostile American press?

PLOTKIN: There was certainly a degree of sympathy for the Sandinista cause prior to their taking power and some continuing sympathy thereafter, but I don't remember it as being viciously hostile. That hostility did increase to some degree once it was clear we were backing the Contras. Overall, I think our media attempted to report things as accurately and objectively as they could.

What was for me the most frustrating aspect of my work was the lack of resolution during

the time I was involved in Central America. It's a situation too common in Foreign Service work. With our tenure in any given job limited to two to four years, inevitably a lot of things are in process when we start and often still in process when we move on. We don't often see things resolved for better or worse. When I cleared my desk in July of '83, I looked back at newspaper clippings I had pulled in the fall of '80. In many cases, all you would have had to do to make the old columns current would have been to change the dates, so little had been resolved in those three years.

Q: How about El Salvador, was that turning into a dangerous place?

PLOTKIN: Most certainly. We were under siege. Once, when I was on the phone with our PAO, Howie Lane in San Salvador, I heard a loud bang, heard the phone drop, and silence. I held on and a few moments later he was back on the line saying "Larry, I'm now under my desk. A mortar round has just hit the embassy. Can I call you back?"

Q: You know, State ARA went through something of a blood bath when the Reagan administration took over. The hatchet hit from Senator Helms and others who believed that we were selling Central America down the river. Did you feel that?

PLOTKIN: My personal political outlook made me something of a centrist regarding our policy toward the region so, of course, I made no one happy. I thought then and continue to believe that communist regimes are best confronted very firmly, contained or replaced. At the same time, I strongly believe that we must, as a state, work within the law, however difficult it may be to define international law. Some of what we did in Central America was either illegal or, at best, walked a very fine line between legality and illegality. Taking a firm stand against the Sandinistas I thought the right thing to do. We should have taken an equally firm stand against death squads in El Salvador and Guatemala from the first sign of such. Pretended we didn't know or looking the other way was a betrayal of what ought to be our standards of behavior.

As all Foreign Service Officers must, whatever my personal views and the dissent channel aside, in public I supported the Reagan administration as I supported the Carter administration. We really have to take the party line, or get the hell out.

Q: Did you have any sympathy for the Sandinistas, at least initially?

PLOTKIN: I don't recall having much sympathy for the Sandinistas, but I certainly had none for Somoza. I think the disappointment for a lot of us was in watching Nicaragua swing from one extreme to another, from a right wing to a left wing dictatorship. Few of us are happy with either and we'd hoped for a democratic regime. Once the Sandinistas began to take the same kind of control of Nicaragua that Castro had taken in Cuba, any sympathy evaporated.

Q: Regarding El Salvador, was there a tendency among the officers with whom you were working to either write it off or feel there was hope that things would work out there?

PLOTKIN: There was hope certainly. A lot of effort was being put into arranging free and fair elections there, pushing a democratic agenda with the right wing government and having them bring the death squads under control. I worked closely with U.S. Election Commission's advisors we sent to El Salvador. The situation was largely analogous in Guatemala. It's difficult to draw the line between terrorism and insurgency, insurgency and civil war. People see them differently. It's sometimes true that my terrorist is your freedom fighter. Our mistake was the U.S. tendency throughout the seventies and eighties to support existing dictatorships because it was the easy thing to do, because they seemed, and perhaps were bulwarks against communism, because they were grateful and hence easy to work with. It was a mistake that often led to just the kinds of governments we were striving to avoid.

Q: What sort of operation did we have in Mexico? One thinks of Mexico as being so plugged into the United States that it almost seems superfluous to work there.

PLOTKIN: You'd think the Canadians were plugged in too, but they certainly don't see things the way we do. It is far worse in Mexico. Our embassy there was, and probably still is the largest in Latin America and the USIS program was correspondingly large. Our Benjamin Franklin Library in Mexico City was one of the biggest USIS libraries in the world, and we had branches throughout the country, with Branch PAOs in Monterrey and Guadalajara. We had a huge student advising and International Visitors programs.

The most difficult job we had in Mexico was working with the media. The media was free, but even more undisciplined than that in Panama. Reporters often made up stories out of whole cloth on even major issues. One of my favorite headlines of the time was "U.S. Steals Mexican Rain." There was a major drought in the U.S. Southwest and in Northern Mexico. Nature, of course, could not have been responsible. For some, the U.S. had to be the villain for this and for any other ills Mexico might suffer. I don't know the situation today, but then the basic tendency was to blame every problem on us. For USIS and the Embassy, the job was to determine which stories to bother to respond to and which to ignore, hoping the usual would happen and the story would fade away. It's an on-going problem in places where the media is so totally undisciplined. It's doubly a problem where such a media exists in a country where our influence is seen to be so great.

Of course there were also continuing border issues. Immigration issues were, and remain, very serious. One attempt at a solution was to create jobs in Mexico. The Mexican border area was one of the first places where U.S. businesses created offshore assembly plants. U.S. parts were shipped to Mexico for assembly and returned then to the U.S. for sale. No customs were involved because none of the materials were sold in Mexico.

I was on the scene as well for the collapse of the Mexican peso. The fall of the peso affected everything from international trade to the huge numbers of Mexican students in the United States who suddenly couldn't make their tuition payments.

Q: Were you there long enough to feel the impact of Charles Wick as USIA Director?

PLOTKIN: Most certainly. Wick was interesting. His personality was mercurial and his opinions were strong so he was disliked by many, but at the same time USIA has never had better access to the White House and was never better funded. Some of us look back at Wick's tenure as something of a golden age because our resources went into decline after he left. Under Wick, USIA expanded and many of us had the opportunity to create programs that I believe strongly supported U.S. policies overseas.

I escorted several new U.S. ambassadors headed for Central America to meetings with Wick. I regularly heard stories about his bad behavior in such meetings, but he behaved well every time I was in his company. I guess I was lucky, though it left me with no good Wick stories to tell. Occasional boorish behavior aside, Wick genuinely cared about and worked at issues important to USIA. He also read the briefing materials we prepared for him. At one point, he went to a Latin American PAO conference, taking with him the briefing materials on Central America I had prepared. I can't remember the name of the State Department officer who spoke to the PAOs, but in the briefing book I had included a paper by this officer. It turned out that all the guy was doing was reading his paper. Unfortunately for him, Wick had read his briefing book on his flight to Mexico, stood up at the conference and said, essentially, "If this is all you have to say, I can have copies of made of your article and have them distributed. Thank you very much." End of session.

Q: Did you get much feedback from the USIA posts in Mexico? Did you have to counter the sentiment that the United States is a huge monster that's trying to destroy Mexico?

PLOTKIN: I mentioned earlier our "theft" of Mexican rain. We often had to deal with stories like that. It may be worse now that the Soviet Union has gone and the world, for the time being, is not seen as bipolar, but it was bad enough in the early 1980s. Since the Monroe Doctrine, we have dominated Latin America and often provoked resentment by out 'bull in the china shop' manners. That resentment is there even when we are on our best behavior. It was evident both when I was stationed in Panama and from the vantage point of the American Republics Office. The U.S., our politicians, our military, and, of course, the CIA was blamed for everything. If the CIA had been as successful as the Latin Americans thought it was we probably would have been in much better shape. The CIA was seen as the invisible hand behind everything that went on that was not so obviously caused by something else that it couldn't be blamed on the CIA. Every economic shift, every government in the region people didn't like, even for the drought in Mexico was laid at our doorstep. It's hard to cope with that because frequently the facts don't matter. Conspiracy theories trump reality. Who shot Kennedy? Who wrote the plays of Shakespeare? Who supported the insurgents? There are always people, some of them in influential places, who won't accept what you and I might believe, even know to be the facts no matter how demonstrable or how persuasively presented.

Q: What about John Gavin, the movie actor who became ambassador to Mexico? He was supposed to be sort of a power unto himself.

PLOTKIN: Actually, the Mexican government was okay with Ambassador Gavin as I recall. While some saw him as something of a loose canon, and his actions were hardly innocent in that respect, they also knew he was well connected to the White House, that President Reagan would take his calls and that he could serve as a conduit to U.S. power that didn't have to go through State channels. By way of contrast, his successor was a Mexican-American from the Southwest. The Mexicans felt he wasn't as well connected as Gavin and there was actually some prejudiced against him for being a Mexican American: "Aren't we important enough to merit a WASP ambassador?" In fact, John Gavin had a Mexican mother and spoke Spanish fluently.

Q: Did you run across any imperial commands out of our embassy in Mexico City?.

PLOTKIN: I can't recall anything more dramatic out of Mexico City than typical ambassadorial demands from other countries, from both political appointees and FSOs.

Q: I understand that he had a number of deputy chiefs of mission, that he was a difficult person. Who was the PAO?

PLOTKIN: Stan Zuckerman. He was a good guy, but very demanding. He knew he was in the most important country in the region and expected AR's time and resources accordingly. I was his most direct contact in USIA and had a good working relationship with him. I don't recall ever having met or had a phone conversation with Ambassador Gavin or one of his DCMs. Everything the Embassy wanted from USIA came to us through the PAO. Just the normal way to do business.

Q: As the desk officer, did you get involved in policy meetings?

PLOTKIN: I attended a weekly interagency meeting at State with senior State officers, my State desk officer counterparts, AID, CIA and DOD representatives.

Q: Was there pressure after Reagan came into office to do something, no matter what, about the communists guerrillas in El Salvador and the Sandinista in Nicaragua?

PLOTKIN: Certainly that was the goal. In the Inter-Agency meetings I attended, our starting premise was the need to respond to the imperative given us by the administration. What followed was either an enthusiastic pursuit of the goal, a less enthusiastic effort within the system to modify the goal, or its subtle undermining. To the extent that memory serves me, most of the people in the meetings fell into the first two categories, and most of the discussion that took place was not whether it was a good idea to get rid of the communists in Central America, but about how best to go about it, especially how to cope with the enthusiasm of the political appointees many of whom knew little about the region other than that they wanted to get rid of the communists.

Invariably, each new administration puts political appointees in positions of significant

power who have little or no experience in the field and little or no knowledge of the cultures that we're trying to influence. We can see that in Iraq today. It seems to me that a major role to be played by FSOs is to convince these people that the rest of the world isn't the U.S. and that solutions that may work here may have to be significantly modified if they are to work elsewhere. It's often nearly impossible to do. Success often depends on how ideological the new Republican or Democratic appointee is.

Q: When did you leave the American Republics office?

PLOTKIN: I left AR in summer 1983. Originally, Ruth and I hoped to go out to the field that summer. This gets us into issues surrounding tandem assignments. I mentioned that we had gone to Panama to get Ruth into a political officer slot after her initial assignment in consular work and her year on leave without pay. We came back to Washington and began fairly quickly to try to look for ongoing overseas assignments. I got involved in an interagency tandem group trying to smooth out some of the differences in procedures that made interagency tandem assignments so difficult to achieve. One ongoing problem was that USIA tended to make its assignments much earlier than State, even before the Department was even accepting bids on assignments to the same places in the same cycle.

As a tandem with children we made a decision that we were not going to go to separate countries and were not going to take leave without pay unless there was a guarantee that within six months the trailing partner would get a job at the same post. In summer 1982, while I was in AR and Ruth was in EB, we bid on a variety of possible on-going assignments for summer 1983. In September '82, I was chosen for a post in Europe where there were three possible jobs for Ruth. It seemed the odds for a successful tandem were pretty good. But Ruth couldn't even bid on those jobs until after the first of October. In the brief interim, one of three jobs was eliminated, the incumbent extended in a second, and the grade of the third was increased putting it a grade above Ruth's personal grade. She still bid on that job, made the final six and was eliminated, largely because she was below grade. I walked in to USIA personnel and said that I wanted to break my assignment. They almost had a heart attack and were not very happy with me for doing so. Fortunately, it was a post easy to fill.

In the summer of 1983, I moved from AR to a position as Program Manager for Europe and East Asia in Arts America, and we began the bidding process again, this time for transfer in summer 1984. Our options were few. For one job I bid on I was at rank. It required a year of language training and would have had me out of Washington five years, which was the maximum Washington tour at USIA. Nobody wanted to give me an extension; they wanted me to follow the rules. I got a call from my career mangler while there were people in my office. "Larry. Sorry. You didn't get the job." "Why?" "The committee decided you were overqualified." Apparently I turned absolutely purple with rage and I told this woman that I would have a year's extension on my desk by noon the next day or she would have a grievance on hers by close of business. The next morning I had an extension for a year.

We were doing our damnedest to make this work, so the next year we bid on a variety of posts only to find that several tandems had bid on the same posts. My first choice was unrealistic, my second was CAO Yugoslavia. By this time I had established myself in Arts America and thought myself well qualified for the post. I got a call from the deputy director of our European area office, EU. "Larry can I talk to you about a possible assignment?" When I met with him, the first thing he said was, "Larry we'd really like you for CAO Yugoslavia, but we want to make sure you don't break another assignment." I didn't think that that many people had taken any interest in what I had done two years earlier, but clearly that wasn't the case. Of course, Ruth was still a month or two from being able to bid on assignments in Belgrade. We consulted over whether to take the risk of my saying yes to the assignment, hoping that she would be assigned there as well. We decided to take the chance and fortunately it worked out. What we endured was not an exception; it was typical of the kind of problems that we and other tandems faced.

Q: Were you able to get personnel to make the system a little more rational?

PLOTKIN: We tried, but we couldn't even bring the assignments cycle of USIA and the Department into the same time frame. That was only resolved when USIA was merged into State. The only breaks we got from personnel we got from USIA. For example, the Department was much more rigid regarding language training, probably because FSI is State's wholly owned subsidiary. When we were assigned to Panama, I needed Spanish training and my job was opening later than Ruth's. USIA was perfectly happy to have me learn Spanish in Panama. The Department would never have done the same for Ruth.

Q: Tell me about your work in Arts America.

PLOTKIN: Arts America was a worldwide program for presenting the U.S. through the arts. Our programs ranged from presenting individual speakers in the arts, authors, artists, curators and the like, to major touring exhibits, to exhibits for the American pavilions at the Sao Paulo and Venice biennales, touring concert artists and theater groups. We were, at the time, doing a significant amount of programming. I was responsible for all programs going to Europe and East Asia.

As I am a CAO at heart, I loved the work I was doing. That's really where I belong in the world and this was a fascinating job as a result. I met a lot of interesting people and it was one of those rare jobs that occasionally allowed you to see a project from start to finish. One project I helped initiate was a photography exhibit by the early 20th Century American photographer Imogene Cunningham, one of the first major women in American photography. Exhibits normally have a life of about four-to-five years from inception. It takes at least a year to get from the idea for an exhibit through its creation, preparation of the catalog, arrangement of tour dates and sites and shipment of the art works. Then the exhibit normally tours for two years. Finally, the exhibit is dismantled and the individual works returned to the lenders. In the case of the Cunningham exhibit, I was in Arts America at the creation, proofed the catalog, and then, during my assignment in Yugoslavia, opened the exhibit at a site there. It was the only time I was able to do that.

Q: How did you find being a cultural affairs officer versus information affair, dealing with the press. Was there a difference a class difference or a different perception?

PLOTKIN: Yes, there is, probably still is a difference. There are some officers who are really comfortable doing both kinds of work and, of course, I did my share of the press and media work over the years. I hope did it reasonably well, but never enjoyed it as much. It isn't a matter of whether I could talk to a newspaper editor as comfortably or successfully as I could talk to a museum curator or director. It was whether I enjoyed doing it as much. And certainly the standard view of things at USIA was that in terms of promotion it was better to be a press attaché than a cultural attaché. It was the more highly valued specialty.

Q: The press type person usually stood at the left hand of the ambassador.

PLOTKIN: Yes, though I was fortunate to work for the most part with ambassadors who valued and made good use of what the cultural side of the shop could do to bring people together. I think those of us who chose to dedicate ourselves more to the cultural side than the press side knew we were putting ourselves at at least a slight disadvantage and decided that it was worth it.

Q: In that period, Director Wick was big on public diplomacy, WordNet was created, there was more TV coverage. How was he regarding cultural programs?

PLOTKIN: He was certainly less interested. Wick had grandiose notions about what we could do. Our budgets for cultural and educational exchanges increased, but not as much as those for media-related information programs including WordNet. He was a great fan of American popular culture and thought it would have great impact to get somebody like Michael Jackson on tour in Eastern Europe. He was very pleased to tell us that Michael Jackson agreed to tour for free, which sounds great until you remember that Michael Jackson doesn't travel alone. He travels with an entourage of about 50 people, musicians and hairdressers, all of whom must be paid at least union minimum. And, of course, we would have to cover transportation and Jackson only travels first class. Michael Jackson may have been willing to waive a huge fee, but our budget couldn't begin to fund the rest of his party. Wick came up with a few such proposals, none of which were ever realized.

Q: During the '80s, the U.S. museum world was going through a huge change from being storehouses of artifacts to being learning centers and more fun than they used to be. Did you sense that a revolution was coming around?

PLOTKIN: We worked closely with a variety of museum directors and curators, but I don't think we fully appreciated how much change was in the air. We were not part of their world directly. USIA had no in-house curators. Arts America had to take our concept, choose a museum and curator, and explore the possibility of our working together. Once a contract was signed, the curator was given substantial freedom, within

the exhibit project description, to pull together exhibit materials and arrange or write the catalog, etc. Obviously, we exercised some degree of editorial control in terms of the contents of catalog and the exhibit, but we didn't do much in the way of censorship.

I can tell you one interesting story. It happened when I was in AR. Arts America was putting together an exhibit of works by 20-plus contemporary American artists to tour Latin America. One of the artists was Robert Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe includes in his oeuvre highly homoerotic photographs. Of course, none of these were included in the exhibit; the exhibit had two of his celebrity portraits. Mapplethorpe did wonderful portrait work, so it wasn't easy to choose those and avoid the issues of pornography, homosexuality and potential charges of censorship.

However, all of the artists in the exhibition were asked to write brief essays about their work. In his, Mapplethorpe wrote something like, "I don't see why it matters what the subject of a still life is. A still life is art whether it's a still life of a vase full of flowers or a cock." This went to the translator and came back in Spanish as, "… a still life of a vase full of flowers or a rooster." I looked at that, knew what Mapplethorpe had meant of course, spent a half an hour laughing at it, decided 'rooster' was the perfect translation for a Latin American audience and approved the essay. Was that censorship? I don't know if Mapplethorpe ever knew how that particular line got translated.

Let me say for the record that when USIA sent speakers out to the field, we never censored what they said. When I introduced to a foreign audience, one of the things I always said was that we are bringing you "Fred Smith" from this university or that think tank to talk about the American electoral process or the works of Mark Twain or whatever, adding the point that these people were speaking for themselves. They were never asked to represent the U.S. government position. Of course, some in our audiences didn't believe that, but we tried.

Q: Did you know of an enemies list or a black list or anything like that?

PLOTKIN: Yes. At USIA, there was no enemies list, but something of a black list, if you can accept the distinction. While we never asked speakers to toe the administration's line, we didn't have to invite back those who were outspoken in unapproved ways. It was made clear from on high that there were some people that we were well advised not to send out to speak. Those of us in the trenches did our best to finesse this as much as we could, but there were limits to what we could do, especially when hot political issues were the subject. It wasn't much of a problem in the arts.

Q: You didn't have young ladies who spoke nude and smeared themselves with chocolate?

PLOTKIN: We never had the opportunity to program Karen Finley, the performance artist. We did, however, send out people to contemporary avant-garde theater festivals who certainly did things that someone whose idea of theater is a straightforward

production of "Death of a Salesman" would have found an odious, but we never had any difficulty with any of those things at all. Authors who were well to the left of center also spoke without problems. Among those I programmed in Yugoslavia, for example, were Alan Ginsberg and E. L. Doctorow.

Q: Did you keep book on these people? I'm not talking about a black list because of political views, but of people who either were obnoxious, difficult to deal with, not very good presenters, what have you.

PLOTKIN: Yes, but. All speaker requests came from the field, sometimes generically – send us someone on the recent elections – and sometimes requesting a specific speaker – we want Alan Ginsberg. We tried to honor those requests, but where someone had a bad track record, we warned the post and suggested alternatives. As I said, during my first days in Yugoslavia, in summer 1986, I hosted the poet Allen Ginsburg, a left wing alcoholic homosexual. I think he would have accepted that description. Despite having been a problem for other posts in earlier times, he behaved himself reasonably well.

Arts America also handled the cultural exchange agreements we had with those communist countries that would otherwise not have allowed us access to audiences there. These ranged from the Soviet Union and China to Bulgaria. The agreements, though we would have preferred the freedom of operating without them, allowed us to reach people in important, if symbolic ways, not unlike ping-pong diplomacy.

Q: With the Chinese, how did you figure out what would have the cultural impact you were seeking? You had that experience in Latin America so could figure out what to do, but when you come to China or India, was there much consultation?

PLOTKIN: Consultation was the norm. We worked closely with our officers in the field and with the country officers in our geographical area offices. In the case of China, Arts America was fortunate to have a young FSO who had just returned from a tour in China and who spoke Chinese, so he was an invaluable asset. In fact, Arts America officers served in a fairly wide range of countries and parts of the world. Further, no post was forced to accept what we offered in the way of programs or speakers. The field had the final say in most instances. By and large this consultative system worked smoothly.

I can recall only two instances where there was a bit of a blow up and we had to pull a scheduled event. Both of these took place in Asia, both, I think in Indonesia. In the first case, the Indonesians refused to let us show some of the works in an art exhibit because they were by Jewish-American artists. In the second, Indonesia asked for a change in the program by the New York Philharmonic because it featured the work of a Jewish-American composer. It both cases our reaction was the same. The exhibit and the concert were canceled in Indonesia and replacement venues were found. I don't recall where the exhibit went; the Philharmonic played Thailand.

Q: It seems funny because the Indonesians have their own form of Islam, and it doesn't

seem to be very much connected to the Islam of the Middle East.

PLOTKIN: I don't recall whether Indonesia decisions were based on their own view of the world or on a sense of fellowship with other Islamic states. I just recall that we hesitatingly pulled out and moved the events to more amenable sites.

Q: And then you took Serbian. How did you find it?

PLOTKIN: Well, I had Polish earlier and though I only had six months of the year course it gave me a bit of a leg up. I had some vocabulary and some sense of how most Slavic languages are structured. It was interesting moment because this was the first time Ruth and I were scheduled to take language together. As you may have noted from your own language studies, on entering the classroom most of us become the same students we were as a high school seniors. How we behave in class and how we do our studying seem to be set in stone. Ruth and I knew in advance that enough people were scheduled to study Serbo-Croatian to allow for two sections. We decided it would probably be best if we were in different sections. That's how we started.

The head linguist came up to me after a couple of weeks and basically said, "Larry you've got to make a choice. You're the third best of the seven people in the program. That means you should be in the group with Ruth because she's the second best. You can either be the third best in a group of the top three or the first best in the group of the bottom four." I knew myself well enough to know that if I was at the top of the group I would coast and that if I was the least of the group I would work very hard in order not to fall behind the two students ahead of me. Ruth and I consulted and agreed that we could at least try being in the same class. Knock wood it worked out. We did have to study in opposite corners of the house because I get up I walk around, I whistle, sing a song. Ruth is focused. She studies and she's much, much better at languages than I am.

Well, we made the right choice. At about the 36 week point in the year, our number one student, Bill Ryerson, who was fluent in Polish and German and really loves languages, left the course having tested 3+/3+. At the end of the 44 weeks, Ruth was scheduled to test before I did. I was very grateful that she got a 3+/3+. I knew I wasn't as good as she, but her 3+/3+ meant that there was that little space that allowed me to get my 3/3. I'm not a great language learner, but I was more successful in using Serbian than the two other Slavic languages I worked in.

Q: When were you in Belgrade?

PLOTKIN: We were there from the summer of 1986 to the summer of 1990. I was the CAO and Ruth was the deputy Political Counselor.

Q: What was the political situation when you got there?

PLOTKIN: The situation when we got there was still good. Yugoslavia was divided into

six republics and two autonomous areas. The problem, which we knew before we arrived, was that the political system allowed no one to become a national leader. They had a rotating presidency; each year it passed to a leader of a different republic. No one had a Yugoslav constituency. They had a Serbian constituency or a Montenegrin constituency or a Slovene constituency, etc. This was little by little eroding the ties among the republics and exacerbating their differences. Throw in the Kosovo situation which was constantly worsening while we were there. The result was that the minor tensions of '86 became a war in '91. The Embassy was aware of the problems. I had countrywide responsibility, traveled a lot and to almost every corner of the country. It was perfectly clear. I'd also read Rebecca West's "Black Lamb, Gray Falcon" before I went out there.

She wrote it during or just before World War II, and it's based on experiences she had touring Yugoslavia just before the War. She was very much a Serbophile, but at the same time recognized that there was enough guilt to go around. She knew that as long as the peoples of Yugoslavia were held together by a strong central government, they might manage, but that should the center ever weaken, they would be at each other's throats. Obviously she was prophetic. But while we were there, we had no trouble traveling from place to place. The biggest problem we faced was language, particularly in Slovenia where they didn't really want to hear Serbian and in Croatia where are Serbian accent wasn't appreciated.

Q: How would you characterize the media?

PLOTKIN: I did not work directly with the media on a daily basis because I was the CAO, not the IO, and we had a large USIS Belgrade office and branches in each of the republics. We had a half a dozen officers in Belgrade. two in Zagreb and one each in the other four republics. It meant a degree of specialization. Yugoslavia was regarded as a key country in the world at that point. It was the one European communist country, two if you count Albania, that had broken from the Soviet bloc and it was very involved in the North South dialogue and in the movement of non-aligned nations. Well before we were there, the USG had decided to make a substantial investment in Yugoslavia and reach as many people as we could. The result was that as CAO I supervised the second largest Fulbright exchange program and the second largest International Visitors in Europe. Only the German programs were larger.

Q: Within these programs did you try for balance, to get enough Kosovars or enough Macedonians involved?

PLOTKIN: It was complex. The Fulbright competition was free and open. Some Yugoslavs didn't believe that because they simply couldn't believe that connections didn't influence everything, but I can guarantee you it was a free and open composition because I went throughout the country interviewing people, supervising exams, the whole business. We did, however, strive for balanced participation, based on population, from the country's eight administrative areas. All candidates took a written test and those who scored highly enough were then interviewed by a board that always included the

Yugoslav executive director of the Fulbright commission, usually someone from the Ministry of Education ministry and always a USIS FSO. I did a good portion of those interviews, but others participated as well. They were designed to get a sense of candidates' command of English and a sense of their ability to cope in an interview and at an American university.

We graded people on a zero to 100 basis, but the cut off was about 90. A lower score wasn't competitive. Seeking a final roster representative of all parts of Yugoslavia, we made only minor compromises. There were times when a Kosovar who scored 92 was chosen over a Slovenian who scored 95. But the Kosovar was qualified. We never took anybody who wasn't qualified, who didn't have at least a score of 90 out of 100. We also, as we did in Warsaw, sought to achieve a balance between science and technology on one hand and the humanities and social sciences on the other.

Q: The Fulbright program had been going for a long time. Were you able to make use of Fulbright alumni?

PLOTKIN: When I was there we initiated a program to find the Yugoslav alumni, to involve as many as possible in an outreach program, and to get them to give back to the program. We were beginning to have some success at the time I left the country, but then everything fell apart. Roughly a year after I left, the country was in so much disarray that the commission was closed and most of the program suspended. Among the losses were embryonic Yugoslav Fulbright Alumni and American Studies Associations. I had taken the lead, working with Yugoslav colleagues, in setting up an American Studies Association to better connect Yugoslav Americanists with American studies in the U.S. They met once and then civil war tore the place apart. Losses like these added to the greater sadness caused by the slaughter that took place.

Q: Why was that we didn't have Fulbright alumni associations in most countries where we're spending so much money? It seems like an opportunity lost.

PLOTKIN: I'm not sure why it didn't happened earlier. In many foreign cultures, there is little or no precedent for these kinds of associations or for any form of volunteerism. In many cases you're try to start something that, with the exception of political and religious associations, is completely new. Creating a Fulbright association in some places is the first attempt at something like a civil society. It was working in Yugoslavia. Alumni read grant applications and worked on interviews with us until the break-up of the country and closing of the Yugoslav Fulbright Commission. I subsequently was involved in a similar effort in Bulgaria, which I'll get to later, where the success continues.

Q: How about the U.S. Fulbrighters who came to Yugoslavia?

PLOTKIN: We had a very successful program. We sent about 50 Yugoslavs to the U.S. each year and received roughly the same number of people from the United States. The American Fulbrighters were very diverse. We had everything there from law professors to

people in American studies, to people in the sciences. The breadth of the program was in part due to the fact that we had a subsection of the program that allowed us to bring in Fulbright grantees from the U.S. for as little as two weeks to do intensive seminars. That allowed us to get people who could never have given us an academic year or even a semester. For example, it enabled us to include a professor of medicine for two weeks of intense training of techniques the Yugoslavs wanted to learn. U.S. grantees came for from two weeks to a year, renewable, some to study or do research, some to teach. We placed them throughout the country so that each republic and territory had Fulbrighters.

Q: In your Fulbright meetings did you run into any nationalistic clashes?

PLOTKIN: Sadly, yes. The Croats always thought the Serbs got too many grantees and the Serbs always thought the opposite. The bickering went on all the time. The question for us was whether this kind of antagonism was simple national rivalry, nasty but not deadly, or whether it was a sign of a situation so passionate that the next step would be drawn daggers. Early in our tour, Ruth and I, and most in the Embassy, were optimistic about the situation. By the time we left it was clear to many of us that things were getting increasingly bitter and that one false step could turn the situation into a civil war. On the other hand, perhaps even more of us thought that the Yugoslavs just couldn't be that stupid; that they would come to the brink, look over the edge and back off. They had so much to lose. Yugoslavia had 20 million well educated, reasonably hardworking people. It probably could have been the first Eastern European member of NATO and of the EU, until everything went terribly wrong.

Even those of us in denial about the possibility of civil war were not blind to the myriad signs, including in the cultured world of a CAO. In late 1989, I went to Ljubljana to open an exhibit of contemporary prints by American artists. I could have spoken in Serbian and have been perfectly understood, but they insisted that I speak in English and actually translated me poorly. On another occasion, a U.S. Fulbrighter teaching in Zagreb, the harpsichordist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, agreed to do a program in Belgrade. The truck driver bringing his harpsichord from Zagreb refused to drive into Belgrade. He said he didn't dare drive into Belgrade with Zagreb plates on his truck. Incidents of this kind were increasingly frequent. At the same time, Milosevic was having his hey day, stirring up a mess in Kosovo. Yugoslavia was on the brink. We left just before it became truly violent.

Q: How did a civilized people come to civil war?

PLOTKIN: The Germans were civilized, too. We should have learned by now that that doesn't make much difference.

Q: What was your impression of artistic attainments and artistic world in the various parts of Yugoslavia?

PLOTKIN: It varied from field to field. I traveled a lot, but most of my time was spent in

Serbia, so I have to qualify my comments to some extent. In terms of painting, there was a lot going on throughout the country. There were no restraints on artists in terms of what they could paint, what media they could use, how they presented their view of the world in their art. There was a huge variety of styles in play, some of it representational, some of it reflecting the history of icon painting, some of it very nonrepresentational and contemporary. There was also an appreciation of what we and what other countries had to offer in painting exhibitions.

Similarly in music there was every thing from the most dissident modern music to the very traditional being both composed and performed, and being performed very well. Theater, conservative in Slovenia, was very avant-garde in Belgrade, some of it truly cutting edge. There was an annual contemporary theater festival there in which people from all over the world were doing some of the wildest things I've seen anyplace. It really was a hugely enthusiastic and active time to be there.

Q: Did USIA play a role in the theater festival?

PLOTKIN: USIA often provided an American participant, including each of the four years we were there. La Mama from NYC was one of the groups we sponsored. The festival always wanted our financial and logistic support for U.S. artists. None of the Yugoslavia festivals was well-funded. We also participated in major poetry festivals in Serbia and Macedonia where I hosted Alan Ginsburg the first year I was there. In addition to his reading his poetry, a volume of his poetry, English on one side and Macedonia on the other, was published. We also took him up to other parts of the country to speak while he was there. We were always represented at the major Graphics Biennale in Ljubljana as well.

USIA also had a substantial book publishing program, publishing in cooperation with Yugoslav publishers. American works that supported our goals in the country and were of interest to Yugoslav publishers and audiences were translated into various Yugoslav languages and published with USIA backing. It was a very successful program. One highlight was a translation of poetry by Joseph Brodsky which we linked to a visit by Brodsky to Yugoslavia. It was his first visit to what he described as a socialist country since being exiled from the USSR. He got off the plane quite nervous and left elated. It was a love fest. He was treated as a visiting god. He gave a reading of his poetry in the largest theater in Belgrade. If you'd been a fire marshal you'd have had a heart attack. I've never been in a place where people were practically literally hanging from the rafters. There wasn't an empty space in that theater. I guarantee no rock star has ever been more ecstatically received. It was a hell of an event. He, in essence, chanted his poems in Russian and an actor read them in Serbian.

Q: How about Slovenian culture? Was it between the West and the East? How did it fit?

PLOTKIN: Though the most western economically, Slovenia was the most culturally conservative part of the country. Slovenes thought of themselves as Western, but it's a

small country of only about 1.8 million when we were there. Slovenes felt themselves surrounded by bigger countries whose cultures were putting the squeeze on theirs. It made them highly nationalistic, intent on preserving and fostering Slovene culture, and defending their separate cultural identity. The result was that it was easy to get an American play staged in Belgrade where it was welcomed gladly, but was almost impossible to that in Ljubljana where the stages were reserved for Slovene plays. They were just that much more intent on their special cultural identity.

Q: How about Croatia? They were extremely proud and put themselves forward as being much more cultured than those uncouth Serbs. How did you find dealing with them?

PLOTKIN: I had no problems there. I would not have agreed with them that they were more cultured than the Serbs. Croatia does have a longer Western cultural history dating its time as part of the Hapsburg Empire while Serbia was part of the Ottomans Empire. In addition, Croatia is Catholic and Serbia Orthodox. Croatia allied with the Nazis, Serbia with the allies. They have histories forming their world views that are simply too diverse and dividing rather than unite them.

Q: How about theater in Croatia and elsewhere in the country?

PLOTKIN: I never went to the theater in Croatia so can't really comment. In Macedonia, there was a lot going on. We had the European premier of American play in Macedonia in the only Turkish language theater outside of Turkey while we were there, translated into and performed in Turkish rather than into one of the official Yugoslav languages. It got very good play. It was even on Yugoslav-wide television with subtitles. There was a very active community of artists there as well and substantive book publishing.

Macedonian is the offspring of Bulgarian, to which it was practically identical until the creation of Yugoslavia, and Serbian which has deeply influenced the language since World War I. It is now officially separate language for at least political purposes. Shortly after I returned to Washington from Bulgaria in 1997, I was asked to welcome a group of Macedonian journalists who had come on a VOA program to the U.S. I thought what the hell; I'll speak to them in Bulgarian. So, I introduced myself in Bulgarian and said a few nice words and then apologized for not speaking their language. I got a great laugh because of course they had understood me perfectly. The differences between Macedonia and Bulgaria are at a level that would ever interfere with one understanding the other.

Q: What about the arts as portrayed on television?

PLOTKIN: There was a certain amount of theater and music programming, more on the traditional side than on the avant-garde side. Television was dominated by popular local and foreign shows, sports and news.

Q: Did you have to fight the popular image of America as presented in the movies, the pop music, TV sitcoms, everything. Was that hitting Yugoslavia when you were there?

PLOTKIN: American pop culture had already flooded Poland when I was there 10 years earlier. It was a given by the time we were in Yugoslavia. American popular culture has won all pop culture competitions hands down. It's everywhere. Everybody wears jeans. Everybody listens to American rock and roll. Everybody goes to American movies. The hard thing for us is to find a way to balance the image created by pop culture where the U.S. tends to be portrayed in sensational terms, often negative. Even when the U.S. is portrayed sympathetically, it's through splashy big movies like "Titanic." The best we can do is to demonstrate to the cultural and political leaders we deal with that we're not all cowboys or Ku Klux Klan and should not be portrayed by taking one element of our culture and making it stand for all of what we are.

Realistically though, it's impossible to overcome the impact that pop culture has on the general population. By the time we were in Yugoslavia, everything from the west was available on the market, legitimate or pirated. We had no choice but to focus on that part of our audience that could be reached through cultural and educational exchanges, cultural propaganda if you like. Our greatest success was through the presentation of people like Brodsky, Doctorow, Ginsberg, and Rostropovic, people whose reputations were international and who were either born in the U.S. or better yet chose the U.S. We were able to get large and influential audiences for both their presentations and in terms of the local media reaction.

Q: What was your impression of the universities?

PLOTKIN: They were pretty good. I dealt mostly with the humanities and social sciences departments, and fields ranging from American studies, literature and history to economics and political science. Among the things we did was to try to influence the texts they used, trying to get the most objective and positive views of the U.S. presented. We also worked on curriculum development, sometimes using American consultants who were obviously more expert in these fields than those of us at the Embassy were. Some were Fulbrighters on grants in Yugoslavia and others were returned Yugoslav exchange grantees. Several of the returned grantees had such successful Fulbright tours in the U.S. that they were teaching half time in the United States and half time in Yugoslavia.

At the same time, the experience of living in the U.S. was not always fully successful. One returned grantee, I won't mention his name, an American studies and history professor at the University of Belgrade, traveled back and forth to the United States all the time. He was a bright, charming fellow whose politics were probably in the middle of the curve and who was basically a social liberal. But mention the word Kosovo and it was like throwing a switch at his head. He basically regarded Kosovars as a subspecies. It reminded me of my time in Augusta, Georgia in the 1960s.

In 1961, I was in training at Fort Gordon, Georgia, as a member of the California National Guard. I was able to travel Atlanta for the Jewish high holidays and was delighted with the opportunity to get off of the base, even though I was a non-observant

Jew. In Atlanta, I was hosted by people who, like my Belgrade colleague, were culturally sophisticated, charming people. I quickly learned, however, not to mention those who were then called Negroes. It was like throwing the same switch in their heads. Suddenly, you were dealing with people who simply didn't accept Negroes as full members of the species. It was a stunning lesson in human nature and an omen of what was to come.

Back to the universities. We had an excellent Masters Degree program in American studies at Zagreb University, the only one in all of Eastern Europe. We supported the program with Fulbright grants in both directions and with significant library support.

Q: Getting America presented in European universities had long been a problem. Anybody with a good education in the United States gets a hefty dose of a European literature, culture and history. Europeans with a good education get very little about us.

PLOTKIN: Well, we used to learn a lot about Europe, especially those of us studying in the humanities. Getting American studies into European universities is difficult. For one thing, most European universities are rigidly compartmentalized. There's huge resistance to creating interdisciplinary studies programs of any kind. Obviously American studies is exactly that. You need to involve people from history and literature, sociology, geography and economics and a variety of other fields. You have to have a university that is ready to invest resources in what for them is a highly non-traditional kind of program. It isn't easy to make these kinds of breakthroughs, but if you don't have a program like that available to students, you obviously aren't going to get any systematic presentation about the United States. What you do get will be occasional classes in individual areas, literature or history, and parts of classes focused on moments of impact by the U.S. on European events, the World Wars, the Cold War and the like.

When I was in Poland dealing with university English departments, students had to choose after two years of study between being an English major or an American major. It was then a matter of which of the two dialects you mastered and which literature you read. For students in other disciplines, there was little opportunity to learn about the U.S. Practically speaking, there was little U.S. history in the history department, little opportunity for history students to take a course in American literature or for lit students to take a course in American history. I expect there's been increased interdepartmental cooperation since I was there. Among my frustrations was that the success we had in developing American studies in Yugoslavia, the masters degree program in Zagreb, the opening of a masters program in Belgrade, and the country-wide American studies association, was blown away by the civil war and the separation of the old Yugoslav into five separate countries and counting.

Q: How did you find museums and exhibit halls?

PLOTKIN: It was easy to find talented and committed people with whom to work who were willing and interested in hosting American exhibits. Our biggest problem was the condition of potential exhibit venues. Our art lenders and curators demanded, and rightly

so, that exhibit halls be properly climate controlled and have good security. Very few of the exhibit sites in Yugoslavia, or elsewhere in the region, has up-to-date technology or the funds to up-grade their facilities. I often found myself trying to convince USIA that the situation really was good enough and that we could make it work. But we were responsible for the well-being of our exhibits. Every time an exhibit arrived, a USIS officer had to be present to examine each work as it was unpacked to compare it to the notes that were made by the USIS officer who had supervised its packing at the previous post. At the end of the exhibit, we returned to make sure no damage was done and to note any changes in the state of each work in the exhibit. We were really quite meticulous and documented everything from a nick on the frame to any apparent damage by light or moisture or contact to the work itself. We had to take it very seriously.

Q: Who were your ambassadors and how did they use the cultural side?

PLOTKIN: Our first ambassador was Jack Scanlon. He was succeeded by Warren Zimmerman. Both were interested in using exchanges and cultural exchanges to support U.S. policy. Often, at my request or because of their genuine interest, they appeared and spoke at USIS-organized events. Their presence gave the events more weight and got us better media coverage. The American ambassador was a figure of some importance in Belgrade. They had occasion to use our performing artists at receptions in their residence as a way of getting into the same room people who might not otherwise be seen together.

USIA at that time ran an annual competition for young American concert artists that led to their touring abroad. We placed them in ambassadorial residences, music academies and concert halls to great effect. Ambassadors Scanlan and Zimmerman also made good use of the arts in embassies program. At our request, they hosted a Fulbright reception every year. Very often when they traveled within the country they would call on our Fulbrighters. We always made sure they knew who was out there doing what and made sure that the ambassador, the DCM, whoever was going out to other parts of the country had a chance to talk to our grantees. They were both interesting people, and they were very often better keyed in to what was going on outside of the capital because they weren't "official Americans." They lived and worked much more in the society and in their universities than we did or could.

Q: When you left there did you feel that things had worked out well. Was it a good time?

PLOTKIN: For us as a family, it was wonderful. Beyond all of the professional aspects of our tours there, the International School of Belgrade was excellent. Our daughters went there for four years and I served four years on the board, part of that time as chairman. It was a schools that didn't have that much in the way of facilities, but had truly excellent teachers, both the Americans we brought in every year who made up about 50% of the faculty and the Yugoslav teachers who on the permanent staff.

We had a Serbian music teacher on the faculty who - I don't know how she did this - could make a 10 year old male soccer player think Mozart was great. On the occasion of

my 50th birthday, our daughters decided to surprise me. We had dinner at home and then they blindfolded me and we drove off to see "The Barber of Seville," in Bulgarian. I thought they'd last through intermission; they were only in the first and third grades at the time. Well, they loved it. They were no more willing to leave at intermission than they would have left Disneyland at noon. I don't know what influence I've had in their lives, but at the end of the performance we were ready to leave and they said, "We can't leave. We have to go backstage and congratulate the performers." What have I done? It's a cultural attaché's dream.

The school also gave me a couple of opportunities to embarrass our daughters when I spoke to school community audiences as chairman of the board and they were in the crowd. I think they've forgiven me for that.

Because I had country-wide responsibilities, we were also able often to travel together throughout Yugoslavia, and we took many of our vacations there in Sarajevo, Dubrovnik, Split, Ilidza, Lake Ohrid, and throughout Slovenia. We saw practically all of the country. The girls cried to see smoke rising from Dubrovnik when it was attacked by the Serbs.

Finally, a professional note. If I had any impact in Yugoslavia, it may have been on the literary community. As CAO, I attended many book presentations, readings, poetry festivals, and was privileged to host many of our most important writers. I've already mentioned Ginsberg, Doctorow and Brodsky, but there were others as well. In addition, we were able to support the publication of American writers by Yugoslav publishers. To my great surprise, years later when we were in Sofia, there was an article in the leading Belgrade literary journal commemorating the death of Joseph Brodsky. The article recalled his visit to Belgrade and thanked me by name for my role in bringing him there.

Q: Let's move on to 1990? Where did you go next?

PLOTKIN: Like some, probably most tandems, we would have loved to have continued overseas, but could not find ongoing assignments. We really had only two criteria. We insisted on having jobs in the same embassy and on having a good school for our girls. As I recall, in that assignment cycle we found only three posts where there appropriate USIS and State positions at rank and where there was a good school. Unfortunately, all of them were in parts of the world in which we'd never served. When I talked to my career mangler about the PAO job in Sri Lanka where there were potential jobs for us, she, "Larry you're a good officer. You'd be highly competitive for this if you had any regional expertise, but there are people out there who know the territory and frankly you've never served anywhere near Sri Lanka, so forget about it." Despite the fact we would have been more than pleased to stay overseas, we came back to Washington.

I spent the first year back as USIA's European area personnel officer, which made me a popular figure in the hallways. We had a personnel officer for each the five territories; at that point Eastern and Western Europe were combined. There was a clear hierarchy among the five of us in terms of the number of people bidding on the jobs each of us had

to try to fill appropriately. While I had to manage a super abundance of applicants for almost every job, excepting a few in the more wretched reaches of Eastern Europe, my African counterpart was walking the hallways looking for any warm body he could send to Ouagadougou and similar posts. That led to a real difference in the way we had to approach consulting both with job applicants and with the heads of our area offices.

Q: Foreign Service assignments are far more important than in many other jobs so we look on personnel as the mount of assignment gods who are not necessarily benevolent. How fair you think the system was and did it serve the goals of the agency as well as those of the FSOs? How did you get the best available person in each job?

PLOTKIN: There were two jobs in USIA's Foreign Service personnel office: career counselors and area coordinators. As the area coordinator, I didn't deal initially with those bidding on jobs. Their career counselors did that. My job was to coordinate between the career counselors and the European Area Office, EUR. I met regularly with the director and deputy director of EUR, went over applicant files with them, and was part of the process of selecting officers from the list of qualified applicants. I must say that the process was as fair as it could possibly be. In the year I was there, there was only one instance where an ambassador's choice for a PAO, someone below the rank of the job, was selected over qualified candidates at rank. Even then there was a trade-off, a price paid by EUR in order to get the guy the ambassador wanted.

The rest of the time there really was an open discussion among the handful of people involved. All of them approached the assignment process with intense seriousness and tried to decide who the best officer for a given position was. Obviously their level of concern differed depending on the job to be filled. PAO candidates were agonized over more than IO or CAO candidates, who were agonized more over than ACAO or AIO candidates. Attention was always paid to the basic criteria; officers at rank, with appropriate area experience and language ability were given the most serious consideration. The more senior the job, the more important those factors were.

Q: I don't need names or anything, but what motivated the ambassador?

PLOTKIN: The person he wanted as PAO and he had served together before and worked together before. The person had country specific experience and language, but the PAO slot was a senior Foreign Service position and the officer in question was a 01. Further, there were qualified OCs available for the job. It was again, I repeat, the one exception out of dozens and dozens of jobs I helped fill that year.

Q: How did EUR pay for it?

PLOTKIN: Basically they got stuck with an officer nobody wanted to place anywhere. I had one of those situations which every personnel system comes up against. I had to deal with a fairly senior officer with a bad reputation, but who wasn't close to being kicked out of the service and who was due for an overseas assignment. He had to be placed

somewhere. EUR was forced to find him a position. To please the ambassador at question, it was a tradeoff they were willing to make.

Q: Often a stint in personnel gets you in line for something. Where did you go next?

PLOTKIN: After one year, I was able to break my two-year assignment in personnel and move to a position as office director of the European Fulbright program. I was there for two years, summer 1991 to summer 1993. Then I moved on to Bulgarian language training and three years as PAO Sofia.

Q: How was the office director assignment?

PLOTKIN: It was splendid and frustrating. I had more responsibility and less authority than in any other job I had before or since. The E Bureau which housed the academic exchange programs is still I believe the most layered bureau then in USIA, now in State, in terms of hierarchy. Whenever you made a decision, you had a handful of people looking over you shoulder. At the same time, I was working on a program that I believe is of great importance and highly effective. It was also a great challenge as my office literally doubled in size and budget in the two years I was there, largely due to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Up until 1991, we had only a small exchange program with the USSR; they wouldn't allow anything like an expansion commensurate with the size and importance of the country. Suddenly our program exploded as all of the new countries that had been part of the USSR wanted a Fulbright program and we wanted to place Fulbright and other program grantees throughout the region. We were literally creating programs.

One of our greatest successes was the creation of a new exchange program created for the former USSR and originally called the Benjamin Franklin program. You've never heard of it because the democrats were in power at the time and they decided to name it the Muskie Program for the former Secretary of State, senator and presidential candidate. We were against using the Muskie name, partly because he was still living and partly because Ben Franklin's name had wide recognition in the former USSR. His works had been translated and published in the Soviet Union. Further, the focus of the program was on practical administration. It offered study in the U.S. in the areas of business, public administration and related fields, areas in which Benjamin Franklin was a star. We thought we had the perfect name, but politics, of course, took precedence.

In any case, I started out with a staff of 10 or 11 and ended up with a staff of 20. We had a budget of over 200 million dollars to manage the European program, covering a large ongoing Fulbright and other exchange programs for Western and Central Europe, and new money for programs with the former Soviet Bloc.

Q: Before we get to that, what caused this layering in your bureau?

PLOTKIN: That's a good question and I haven't an answer. I'd guess like Topsy, it just grew and grew. It was very much in place when I arrived. There have been several attempts over the years to change its structure, but to the best of my knowledge to no avail. When USIA merged into State, it was given the status of a bureau with an assistant secretary at its reins.

Q: What types of programs were we particularly interested in with the counties of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe?

PLOTKIN: Eastern European already had traditional Fulbright programs in place at a substantial level. The changes there had mostly to do with the management of those programs. Where we once had had to work with the ministries of education, after the fall of the wall we were able to create autonomous Fulbright commissions and have open competitions for grants. Even in the bad old days, we had better cooperation by and large with the countries in the Soviet bloc than with the minimal program in the Soviet Union.

But the change to autonomous commission in places like Poland was significant. When I served in Warsaw, there was one official from the Ministry of Education and two of us, the CAO and ACAO, from the Embassy who coordinated everything. We basically sat down and decided who got Fulbright grants. Obviously, the Ministry of Education official had his masters and its orders and we had our priorities. It was a very closely held, though not secretive, negotiation and the major battle was always, as I mentioned before, between the Polish government's desire to send people almost entirely in science and technology and our interest in balancing that with an equal number of people in humanities and the social sciences. We always succeeded in creating the balance.

Once the wall fell, we were able to create a bilateral Fulbright commissions in most of the former bloc countries. On my first trip back to Warsaw as office director for the program, I got off the plane and was driven straight to the ministry of education to negotiate an agreement outlining the nuts and bolts of establishing a commission. Commissions in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Romania quickly followed. It changed the way the selection process worked. Instead of sending Fulbright applications to a ministry, Poles applied directly to the commission. In the old days, your application might never clear the ministry of education or the interior ministry; now it was certain to be given consideration on its merits. We advertised the competition for grants in newspapers around the country. The process was much more open, transparent and fair.

The commissions, where they existed, also managed the new programs for the region, the Ron Brown program in Eastern Europe and the Muskies in the former USSR. Both of these gave fellowships largely in business and public administration. The process was pretty much the same: an open competition that included your curriculum vitae, your essay, and later the TOEFL exam and an interview with members of the board, always with at least one American and one host country national on the panel of interviewers.

Q: Did it change the character of the people who were coming through?

PLOTKIN: In the old days everybody who came through knew that they had been cleared by all the powers that were interested in their grant applications. For us, there was always a level of concern about how much each applicant was committed to the government. We knew some of the candidates as individuals and had a sense of who might be a government stooge and who was a legitimate scholar. In Poland at least, all of the applicants sent us by the Ministry of Education were highly qualified academically. Not only did we at the Embassy find them so; their American host institutions tended to rave about the quality of the grantees they hosted. But while there was never an issue of quality, there was always the sense that someone who might have been an even better candidate had been blackballed by a government that decided he was too politically incorrect. The change opened the door to outsiders and dissidents.

Q: Back in the early '80s, my wife got her masters in linguistics at American University and her best professor was a Polish Fulbrighter.

PLOTKIN: Probably Jacek Fisiac from Poznan University. Polish grantees and others from the region have done wondrously well in the U.S. for a couple of reasons. They are very well educated, very well prepared and they have good English. Perhaps equally importantly, they appreciated the opportunity to study here far more than typical British, German or French Fulbrighters who had all kinds of ways to come to the United States. When we sat in Warsaw in 1975 and chose one person over another, we knew that we were making potentially life shaping decisions for both the successful applicant and the loser who might never get another chance to go West. Obviously if you're a French physicist, there are lots of ways to get to the United States.

Q: Did you have any problem areas in Europe?

PLOTKIN: Yes. In a few countries there were obvious official attempts to make sure that those favored by the government received grants through their connections. Even where that wasn't the case, because connections and bribes were so crucial in most of Eastern Europe to getting anything done, many could not bring themselves a believe that the Fulbright selection process was fair and open. There was, and probably remains, a substantial amount of cynicism to overcome, suspicion that the competition is rigged no matter how much you advertise it or how open you try to make it to the public.

The other problem was that people coming out of places like Albania didn't want to go back. One of the conditions attached to accepting a Fulbright grant to the U.S. is that you return to your home country for a minimum of two years during which you are supposed share the knowledge you've gained through your experiences in the U.S. Not only did the Albanians not want to return, there were also fairly frequent instances of grantees from the richest of Western European nations asking to be relieved of their obligation to return home. They often found themselves wonderful job offers here. A USIA committee met periodically to adjudicate appeals, requests for exceptions, and we had clear criteria to apply. Exceptions could be given if there was an issue of U.S. national security, if there

was a genuine possibility that a grantee might face torture or prison on returning home, if there was a health problem that could be addressed in the U.S., but not in the grantee's home country. So, for example, if a brilliant physicist came over here and a U.S. nuclear agency thought the grantee was indispensable to progress in the field, it was likely that there would be an adjustment of his status. Overall, there were only a handful of exemptions given in the two years during which I was directly involved in the program.

Q: Did any of your grantees face problems on returning to their home faculties or institutes? I remember cases in the '60s when scientists returned and found real resistance to change. Colleagues said, in essence, "Look, we learned our stuff in Vienna in the 1930s and this is the way we do it. Grantees also felt the lack of cutting edge equipment available in the U.S., but rarely available in Eastern Europe

PLOTKIN: There were instances of both problems. Faculties from which Fulbrighters went to the U.S. were committed to holding an appropriate position open pending the grantee's return. Exactly what you've described happened in a significant number of cases. Eastern European Fulbrighters often found themselves returning to faculties filled with academic reactionaries, whatever their politics might have been. They were resistant to any change, including teaching methods and interdisciplinary cooperation.

In the sciences, grantees who did research at highly sophisticated American facilities generally returned home to facilities where there was nothing comparable available. Without that equipment, they couldn't apply what they'd learned. USIA officers in Washington and in the field even talked about not selecting people in advanced scientific fields, not because they lacked merit, but because we knew that it was really a non-starter for them when they got back, that it really wasn't going to work very well and that all they could and often would do was immediately turn around and try to find way to get back to the west to a lab that could support their research.

Teaching styles were also an issue. Most European universities were created strictly on the German model as were ours to a degree. But American universities evolved, became open to more interactive teaching styles and to interdisciplinary academic pursuits. As a student in Poland or Yugoslavia, you went to lectures where listened, took notes and left. You never opened your mouth to comment or ask a question. Every once in a while a grantee would come back from the United States impressed by and having enjoyed a more Socratic dialogue with their students. Sometimes this worked wonderfully and they became a model for other professors, at least within their departments. More often by far, these people were not very well appreciated.

Q: This was the time when George Soros began to put a lot of his money into exchange programs. One, how did you feel about his program and two, were you working parallel, did you consider how what he was doing interacted with what you were doing?

PLOTKIN: My reaction was mixed. It was great that his resources were made available and most the programs he funded were well conceived; the money was well spent. By and

large I was a fan of what Soros was doing, though I confess that I found his attempts at philosophy sophomoric and egotistical. Still, what he achieved on the ground in the countries where I had personal experience with the program was important, especially in the development of a civil society.

The degree to which Embassy and Soros programs were coordinated depended largely on the in-country relationship we were able to develop with our Open Society counterparts. My experience with this was exclusively in Bulgaria where we developed a very strong cooperative working relation with the Open Society officials in Sofia to the extent that I was invited to participate in their annual meeting in 1996, I believe, which Soros and his board also attended. I don't know how often that happened in other countries in the region. In any case, we worked well together. We made sure that we did not duplicate each other's efforts, and tried to run complimentary programs. We met with some frequency and on more than one occasion passed to the other programs we thought had merit that we could not fund, allowing the other to pick up the program.

We had similarly good working relations with other exchange programs with the United States operating in Bulgaria, like the Cyril and Methodius Foundation. Working together, in every case our dollars went further. We even cosponsored events. USIS Sofia had an auditorium. We frequently used that facility to cosponsor programs of mutual interest with Open Society and Cyril and Methodius. Not only did we all come out ahead, we also let the public know that we were colleagues, not competitors who could be played off against each other.

Q: Was the situation different in other countries where Soros was operating?

PLOTKIN: Each country's Open Society organization was a little different. There were also differences in the degree to which the host countries had resources to contribute to exchange and other programs. It ranged from Albania, where we and other outside agencies fully funded every exchange and event that took place, to Germany which, for example, funded more than 50% of the entire cost of the Fulbright exchange program. Other countries fell someplace between those two extremes.

Some countries were also resistant to Soros' efforts for other reasons. Many did not like or know how to deal with non-governmental entities and had no provision in their laws for doing so. They could not recognize the legitimate legal existence of such organizations and had no legal provision for tax relief for NGOs. In the case of the Soros Foundation, there were also issues of anti-Semitism. Soros is a Hungarian-born Jew and some countries used that to rouse public animosity toward his efforts.

Q: Let's take Albania as an example. Albania has always been a poor and a small country. What were we looking at and what could we do there?

PLOTKIN: First, to reinforce your point about Albanian poverty, our first PAO, who went there in 1991, was a colleague of mine from personnel. She reported that for much

of her tenure there she lived on MREs, "meals ready to eat." They were brought into the Embassy from the U.S. military because there was almost nothing available on the local market. Obviously there's been some improvement since. I don't know how much and I've not been there. The good news out of Albania was that we were happily surprised at how many Albanians had a good command of English. We anticipated that in a place that was so isolated, so deliberately cut off from the rest of the world, their foreign language ability would be poor. It was a pleasant surprise because it meant that there were viable exchange candidates from the beginning of the opening of Albania.

When we began to organize exchange programs for Albanians, it was necessary for us to first determine the fields of endeavor that we and the Albanians wanted to stress. It was clear that in the case of Albania, the greatest need was in the fields of rule of law, public administration, university in administration, fields like those. Our main goal was to help the Albanians create a civil society and built enduring civil institutions.

Q: After two years with the Fulbright program, then what?

PLOTKIN: It was time to try to get out of the country again. The tandem problem was again an issue. Among my top choices was a bid on PAO Sofia where there was also an opening for the Counselor for Political and Economic Affairs that Ruth wanted to bid on. Fortunately it worked out. We went through the usual trauma and I believe I got my assignment over another tandem, which took a bit of the joy out of it. I, again, was given my assignment well before Ruth was paneled because of the disconnect in terms of the timing of the assignment process between USIA and the State Department. There was an additional complication when the person Ruth was set to replace tried, fortunately too late, to extend. So it worked out.

Q: Ruth told me that there were efforts made by tandem couples to bring these two assignment cycles into line. Did that get anywhere?

PLOTKIN: No. I mentioned this before. In the early 1980s. I was involved in an unofficial interagency committee made up of tandem members from State, USIA, DOD and AID. I don't recall if any other agencies were represented. The difficulties ranged from those faced by single agency tandems, to those from two foreign affairs agencies, to the worst case, USIA-DOD tandems. One of our major objectives was to try simply to get the timing coordinated among State, USIA and AID. The bureaucracies, especially State's, were rigid. It never happened.

Q: How did you find Bulgarian?

PLOTKIN: I'd always been told that once you hit 50 your ability to learn another foreign language decreases significantly. I hadn't given that any serious thought, but I had indeed hit 50 and then some. Bulgarian is the easiest of Slavic languages because it has none of the declensions of Polish and Serbian, though it does have an enclitic article. I thought it was going to be easy. Not so. I ran into three different buzz saws. My language learning

ability had plummeted. I found that I couldn't retain new vocabulary nearly as well as in the past. I understood the structure of the language, but I'd learn a new word in paragraph A and by the time I was the same word in B, the definition was gone and I'd be cursing myself. It was really a hassle.

On top of that in the middle of the course I had neck surgery, a couple of vertebrae fused. Finally, my predecessor bailed out early and the Embassy and EUR put pressure on me to go to Sofia early. The result was that a slower learner only got about 2/3 of the 44 weeks course. I'm convinced that FSI gave me a passing 3/3 out of sympathy. While I got by decently in Sofia, my Bulgarian was never as good as my Serbian, a harder language.

Q: You served in Sofia from '94 to '97. What was the situation in Bulgaria like?

PLOTKIN: They had already had their first post-communist elections before we got there and had put a center-right party in power, but new elections were called shortly after we arrived. Many from the Embassy served as election monitors throughout the country.

The good news was that the elections were clearly free and fair. On the day that I spent as a monitor, I visited 10 precincts and was invited by the first one to come back at the end of the day to help them count the votes. I kept an appropriate distance, but did participate in the process in an almost direct way. At every precinct we visited, the precinct officers were excited to show us how fair and open it was. Voters who came to the wrong polling site were quickly directed to their correct precinct. The voting booths were fully private. We dropped in on precincts unannounced and all the U.S. monitors, and those from other international organizations, had pretty much the same experience. It was complicated by the large number of political parties participating. Many had no hope of winning a seat in parliament, but each had its color-coded ballot. I once had a complete set of ballots; I think there were 44 parties running, each with its chosen color, some striped, making it possible even for the semi-illiterate to vote their choices. The process worked well.

The bad news was that, in the end, the former communists, now re-named socialists, were voted back into power. This caused us some grief in terms of our ability to work with the government; it wasn't a disaster, but was highly frustrating. A couple of years later the Bulgarians took to the streets to oust the socialists from office by forcing new elections.

Q: Who was your ambassador when you arrived?

PLOTKIN: It was Bill Montgomery, later replaced by Avis Bohlen.

Q: What were your responsibilities as public affairs officer?

PLOTKIN: A little bit of everything. This was prior to what I think of as the hostile takeover of USIA by the State Department. USIS programs were closely coordinated with State and the other agencies in Sofia, but we had our own budget and, to a degree, our own priorities. We had a suite of offices about a kilometer from the chancery. Obviously

our autonomy began and ended with the good will of the ambassador so making sure that I wasn't out of line was always part of the balancing act that those of us had to perform who were heads of independent or semi-independent agency offices.

The programs I supervised included the Fulbright and International Visitors programs, a book publishing program, a media center and library, cultural presentations, intense work with the Bulgarian and, occasionally the U.S. and international media, the Democracy Commission grant program, a program that took key Bulgarians on visits to NATO, and more. I managed a staff of five FSOs, later cut to four, and a staff of about 20 FSNs.

In addition to managing and doing some hands on work with these programs, I, of course, advised the ambassador on public affairs issues. Bulgaria had and probably still has a press that was very free, but entirely irresponsible. Each newspaper and magazine was strongly associated either with one of the political parties or the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, a labor group, or the like. There was very little objective reporting. Basically each journal spun stories according to the political, religious or social point of view it advocated. I almost bought drinks for everybody the one time that a reporter actually called me before publishing a story to get the embassy's view of whether it was true or not. That happened once in three years. The IO got a few calls, too, but by and large it was wide open. The press also created stories out of whole cloth. On one occasion, Bill Montgomery went to Italy for a meeting between NATO Mediterranean command officials and a number of U.S. ambassadors from the region. I don't know what they discussed behind closed doors, but at least one newspaper thought it did. What they had discussed behind closed doors was how to restore all the monarchies of Eastern Europe. I've got the newspaper to prove it.

On another occasion, it was reported that the ambassador's wife was pregnant. She wasn't, and wore her tightest dresses for several weeks thereafter. What do you do with these stories? The ambassador was furious in both cases - and there were other cases, too - and really wanted to counter attack. My job was to help him distinguish between those stories that merited a response because they were important enough in terms of our bilateral relationship and U.S. policy, and those that were best left alone to die a quiet death without any response from us. Personal pique was not the issue and often a response simply gives longer life and a degree of credibility to garbage. We did respond to serious misinformation and we worked hard to have an impact on the way stories were reported that were directly related to our interests and on getting the media to cover stories important to us.

Q: You say there was a free press and at the same time the old line communist party was in power. How did they live together?

PLOTKIN: The communists by then had a younger generation of leaders in charge; the new prime minister was under 40. While in his heart he may have wished to reestablish the good old days of communist control, the Socialists had pretty much acknowledged that some of the changes that had taken place could not be reversed, at least not without

calling out the army which might well not have responded as they wished, and that there were other national issues of greater concern, especially the economy.

Bulgaria was losing population. The best and brightest were emigrating in large numbers. While they appreciated Bulgaria's new found freedoms, they also saw much greater economic opportunity elsewhere and finally had the right to leave if they chose to do so. Sometimes it was deeply disappointing to us because we really wanted some of these people to stay and help change the place. For example, one member of Bulgaria's supreme court who had been a Fulbright grantee teaching the United States was ready to bail out. There were many others.

Shortly after I arrived in 1994, I had the opportunity to initiate an exciting new program created for Bulgaria and the rest of the former Soviet bloc. It was called the Democracy Commission, a program of small grants to new NGOs in fields related to democratization and creation of a civil society. USAID inaugurated an analogous program about a year later. For both programs we created an Embassy interagency working group headed by the ambassador to review all the applications. It gave each of us a chance to argue for our favorite NGOs, to influence the distribution of funds, and to have a stake in the success of local NGOs. We made a concerted effort to advertise the availability of these grants country-wide and to make certain that NGOs outside of Sofia had a fair share of our support. One FSN on my staff spent a significant portion of his time visiting the NGOs, checking their books and making certain that the funds were appropriately spent.

One NGO we funded created the first street law program in Bulgaria. It was headed by one of the foremost lawyers on the University of Sofia faculty who, incidentally, was also the coach of Bulgaria's first law student teams to participate in international moot court competitions. He had had part of his education in Australia and about a year after we left the country in 1997, he immigrated to Australia. Losing people like him hurt our efforts and hurt Bulgaria even more. On the other hand, you can't fault them for wanting to make the best lives for themselves and their families. It's among the risks you take in opening the doors of a country.

Let me go back to your original question about how the former communists were doing. When we arrived, it was just a few years after communism was defeated and Bulgaria was free of Soviet domination. The bad news was that the immediate economic effect was a drop in the standard of living for the majority of Bulgarians. The drop in the standard of living was made all the worse by a general collapse in social services, a real and strongly perceived increase in crime, and a greater disparity of income from the poor to the wealthy. Crime had been largely underreported in the past and wealth hidden. The majority of Bulgarians felt, and often were, poorer and at great risk in 1994 than they had been in 1989. They felt that the government had lost control of the country. Medical care was harder to come by for the poorest people in particular.

As a result, it was no surprise that they voted for the former communists. However, the socialists were even less successful than the center-right party in their attempts to manage

and reform the country and, in 1997, lost power to a new center-right government. That party, in turn, lost power to Czar Simeon's party, and that party is now apparently on the ropes. Bulgaria has gone through a series of governmental changes with each new set of governors failing to bring the changes that people demand if they are to vote again for that party. That's the bad news. The good news is that all elections have been free and fair and every change in government has been peaceful. Nobody's been shot. There hasn't been any significant electoral fraud, and, by and large, the staffs of the ministries have remained in place allowing for a degree of functioning governmental continuity.

Q: Did we have programs trying to do anything to try to create a responsible press?

PLOTKIN: Certainly. Many of our exchange grantees were from the media. We brought American media experts to Bulgaria to give seminars and work with newspapers, radio and television as advisors. These were people were placed in Bulgarian media for a month and helped them to try to become economically viable and as modern and Western in their standards as possible. But newspapers and magazines had little incentive to adopt standards of objective reporting. Their first priority was to sell papers and advertising and to support the political party they were aligned with. Often, that meant sensational stories that were totally undocumented. Headlines were as sensational as possible, even when the story that followed was entirely routine.

There's some of that in every culture, but in Bulgaria, with one possible exception, all the papers were, in essence, tabloids. At least a few individuals in the media were changed by our programs, but it was a hard sell. One attempt we made was to reach them young by working closely with the country's two university-level journalism programs. The largest was at the University of Sofia; the other was at the American University of Bulgaria, AUBG. We brought the Bulgarian faculty to the U.S. for training and orientation and placed American grantees on their faculties. We also helped with curriculum development.

AUBG is an interesting story. It opened in 1991 under the aegis of the University of Maine as one of the first U.S. universities in Eastern Europe. It has had major grants from both USAID and Soros. It now has it's independent accreditation through the Northeast Association of Universities of the United States. AUBG graduated its first class of 100 students in May 1995. The kids are terrific. They're getting an American undergraduate degree in Bulgaria, all classes taught in English, all taught to American standards. A substantial part of the faculty is American and they and the school's graduates are beginning to make a difference. Many graduates have degrees in business and all have fluent English, highly desirable assets to Bulgarian firms wishing to expand their markets outside of the country and to foreign firms working in Bulgaria.

Q: Normally what you do as public affairs officer is try to have dialogue with the media, get them to present your point of view correctly and this can be like talking to a bunch of kindergarten kids about ethics. How do you work with irresponsible journalists?

PLOTKIN: Perhaps I overstated the case a little bit. We could, for example, get almost anybody we wanted to interview the ambassador and we were able to maintain editorial control of the interview. Further, there was intense interest in the United States, its positions on issues and everything about our culture. By timing interviews, careful not to flood the press and make them ordinary events, by getting stuff out when we wanted to, by making the ambassador available to journalists, we were able to get our voice heard in a very direct way. We also used visiting luminaries, both from the U.S. government and the private sector. Among those for whom I organized highly attended and successful press conferences were Zbigniew Brzezinski and Harvard economist Michael Saks. Other visitors included Secretary Cohen, General Clark, Justices Rehnquist and O'Connor. All attracted huge media attention and, for the most part, their visits were objectively reported. Using people as interesting and credible as these gave us a real shot at setting the record straight and countering the wildest fabrications about our policies.

Q: Was television an important medium?

PLOTKIN: It was increasing important because the government stations began to have private sector competition while we were there, both Bulgarian and from overseas. These broadcasters were beginning to have an impact. They provided alternative news sources, especially for the growing number of Bulgarians for who television was their primary source of information. When we were kids, there were afternoon newspapers. The evening news on television killed them. We are seeing the same impact in Eastern Europe where, little by little, people are abandoning print for electronic media.

Q: How about their tapping into things like CNN and European television and all.

PLOTKIN: That, too, was increasing. Some of it was via the use of foreign broadcasts on Bulgarian television, some through the increasing availability of satellite dishes. Many apartment buildings had so many they looked like mushroom farms. They were pulling in both news and entertainment. Even Latin American telenovellas. I remember seeing such programs both in Bulgaria and in Yugoslavia

Q: When you were in Bulgaria, all hell was breaking loose in the Balkans, at least in Bosnia. What was the reaction in Sofia and what were we doing from your perspective?

PLOTKIN: We worked very closely with the Bulgarian government on issues relating to their substantial border with Serbia. A porous border presented a couple of major temptations to Bulgarians. Most important was the temptation of profit from smuggling into Serbia material that we didn't want the Serbs to have. That was complicated by the frequent cooperation of Bulgarian customs officials. They were poorly trained and even more poorly paid. It made them highly susceptible to bribery.

The issue that had the most negative impact on Bulgaria's economy was the disruption of their trade route to the west. They were on the far side of Serbia. Bulgaria's most direct path to Western European markets goes through Belgrade and that route was blocked.

Bulgarian exports either had to go by ship through the Baltic and the Mediterranean, which takes too long, or had to go overland through Romania and Hungary. The logistics of moving Bulgarian products west greatly complicated their ability to profit from their own free market reforms. They also lost the Yugoslav market, itself a serious blow.

The Bulgarian government had other problems with the break-up of Yugoslavia. They were concerned about any spillover. As Bulgarians are close to the Macedonians in history and language, they were deeply concerned about the fate of Macedonia.

Q: Macedonia was thought to be threatened with a Serbian invasion. Was there any sympathy for the Serbs as fellow Orthodox Slavs?

PLOTKIN: There was some sympathy, even though Bulgaria and Serbia have also been at war with each other. There was no question of Bulgarians rushing to the border to sign up to fight with the Serbs. There was more sympathy for the Macedonians. Some Bulgarians think that Macedonia is part of Bulgaria. The borders in that part of the world have shifted enough times that almost anyone can made a historical claim on almost any piece of Balkan territory. There's hardly a patch of land that hasn't several claimants on it. Macedonia is one of those patches of land. Albania, Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria surround Macedonia. It is easy to imagine that Macedonia could disappear in the blink of an eye, with each of those four countries grabbing what they somehow believe is rightly theirs. You could also imagine Macedonia expanding and taking over Northern Greece if you like. One of the things we were concerned to do throughout the region was to maintain stable borders and we did all we could to influence Balkan governments to accept current borders.

Q: We put a small force into Macedonia, didn't we?

PLOTKIN: I think it came to less than 1000 troops. They were basically a tripwire to make certain that the Serbs made no attempt to invade Macedonia or use Macedonia as a base to control Kosovo. They also served to help maintain stability between Macedonian Slavs and Macedonia Albanians by being there. They didn't interfere, but they were there.

Q: Did the Bulgarians support the Macedonian Slavs?

PLOTKIN: It wasn't a major issue because there was no major conflict going on in Macedonia, but certainly Bulgarian sympathies were the Slavic Macedonians.

Q: How about Greece?

PLOTKIN: Good relations by and large. While we were there two new border crossings were opened between Greece and Bulgaria, boosting trade between the two. There were some issues as well, but they weren't critical. One was the Greek denial and Bulgarian insistence that there exists a substantial Bulgarian-speaking minority in Greek Macedonia. Bulgaria also had concerns regarding its own minority populations. Ten

percent of Bulgarian citizens are Turks, and there is a significant Roma minority.

Q: How was that played when you were there?

PLOTKIN: The situation was good in historic terms. Under the communists there was a major attempt to Slavicize the Turks, to force them to take Slavic names and speak only Bulgarian. It ended up causing a great many Bulgarian Turks to flee into Turkey, causing serious tension between the two countries. The Bulgarian Turks were the remnant of the Turks that occupied most of the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire. The Slavicization campaign died with the communist government. Under Bulgaria's new constitution, there are no second-class citizens, at least officially, and political parties are not allowed to have religious or ethnic identities. There is, however, what is in effect the Turkish party which has been able, after a couple of election, to make itself critical to the formation of coalition governments. It, thereby, wields influence greater than its size would suggest. The party is very careful to have both Slavic and Turkish Bulgarians in its leadership so that it can't be accused of being simply a Turkish party, but everybody knows where its principal sympathies lie.

While the Turkish minority continues to face some prejudice and is certainly less successful economically than Slavic Bulgarians, the Roma really live at the bottom of the economy of Bulgaria and are widely misunderstood and despised. Even they, however, have created NGOs to work their interests and which we are helping to sponsor. Most are involved in trying to move forward in the areas of Roma civil and land ownership rights.

Q: Were they settling down?

PLOTKIN: There are two groups of Roma in Bulgaria and throughout the region. A substantial number have settled, work their own land and living in stable communities. Others fit the familiar stereotype of the caravan Gypsy.

Q: When I was in Belgrade, every time something didn't work you'd hear, "It's because we were 500 years under the Turkish yoke." Did the Bulgarians still play that card?

PLOTKIN: Yes, though I don't think they used that excuse as often as the Serbs did. In Serbia, you sometimes wanted to grab people by the shoulders, shake them and tell them to get over it. Put that history behind you. Don't forget it, but focus on what needs to be done now and don't simply blame all that's going wrong today on a 500 year Turkish domination that ended a century ago. That gets you nowhere. It doesn't even get you any sympathy from anybody except your neighbors who were also dominated.

Q: How about Romania?

PLOTKIN: Once they got rid of Ceausescu it was a changed place, but in terms of my responsibilities, Romania didn't figure strongly. The biggest problem is that Bulgarians and Romanians don't trust each other. There is still only one bridge across the Danube

which runs almost the length of the border from East to West between the two countries. The reason there is one bridge is you can blow it up in a hurry, thus blocking the invading hordes from one side or the other. I can't think of any other reason, though there are many good economic reasons for having additional bridges. When we were there, studies were underway for a second bridge further to the West. A site was finally chosen, but frankly I don't know whether construction has begun or not. I've lost track of the issue.

Q: Was there much trade between the two?

PLOTKIN: Not as much as there should have been and at least partly limited by a lack of communication infrastructure between the two countries. You can only get so much traffic over one bridge in a day. All the alternative routes are longer and slower.

We were trying to open up borders in the region so that the Balkan countries, all relatively small, could begin to expand their markets and become more efficient producers of goods. Our success was limited. As I mentioned there were increased openings between Greece and Bulgaria, and Macedonia and Bulgaria had good economic relations. We were working on helping create better communication between Romania and Bulgaria, and I presume that, as things settle down in the former Yugoslavia, there will be greater opportunities for trade between Bulgaria and the various parts of the former Yugoslavia.

Q: How did you find dealing with Bulgarian government officials?

PLOTKIN: It was a mix, depending on which government was in power and on the level at which you were trying to communicate. For example, we had prepared an educational exchange agreement originally requested by the Bulgarian government. I drafted it very shortly after I got there. It was given the usual massage by the ambassador, by USIA and by the Department and everyone on our side was satisfied with it. After informal consultations, we presented it to our colleagues in the Ministry of Education for their comments, review and signature. Unfortunately, before that process was completed, the socialists took over the government. Every few weeks over the next two years I was told I'd have the agreement signed and sealed in a couple of weeks. It never happened. Occasionally, a good working-level colleague in the ministry would say to me, "We're happy this agreement, but we can't get anybody at the top to sign off on it. The socialists simply didn't want to sign it, didn't want to go so far as to reject it, and so stonewalled.

Eight or ten months before we left, the socialists were thrown out and a center-right government took over again. Within a few weeks the agreement was finalized. To a large degree that was the pattern that we were stuck with as long as the socialists were in power. Their sympathies were not with us and while they didn't stop things from happening, they were excellent at stalling. At least they didn't try to take over AUBG and they didn't try to undermine the Fulbright commission. They simply weren't going to move things forward that didn't strike them as being enough in their favor, whether in Bulgaria's favor or not.

Q: Was this just old Marxist reflexes or were they anti-American at this stage of development?

PLOTKIN: I think there was some nostalgia for the old days. Remember, unlike the resentment felt in other Soviet Bloc countries that were invaded and occupied by Russia, the attitude in Bulgaria was very positive toward the Russians. Not only did they never occupied Bulgaria, they were key to the liberation of Bulgaria from the Turks. We and the center-right political parties were pushing ideas that would link Bulgaria more closely with the west, ranging from NATO and EU membership to a normalization of the legal status of the American University in Bulgaria. The Educational Exchange Agreement, for example, included language that recognized AUBG as a Bulgarian institution with the rights and responsibilities of a Bulgarian university. That was a major sticking point the socialists. They also knew that AUBG wasn't going to pull out and that it would cause an uproar were they to try to stop the university from operating. The best they could do was not to let anything further the legal status of the place.

Q: Was there overt hostility towards America in the government? At that time, U.S.-Russian relations were good.

PLOTKIN: There was no overt hostility. There were just people who just didn't want to cooperate with us as much as we would have liked and thought beneficial to Bulgaria. Like Russia, our troops have never been in Bulgaria, though there was some lingering resentment over U.S. bombing of Sofia toward the end of WWII. Remember, Bulgaria was allied with Germany.

Q: What was the feeling towards the European Union in Bulgaria? Toward NATO?

PLOTKIN: Among more forward looking Bulgarians, NATO and the EU were El Dorado. Bulgarians formed the first NATO non-governmental affiliate organization in Eastern Europe and began a campaign both with NATO and within Bulgaria for membership. Bulgaria's current foreign minister, Solomon Passy, who headed the organization, worked very closely with the Embassy. We had a program with NATO, as did other former bloc countries that allowed us to take two groups of 5-6 key contacts to Brussels for a NATO tour and briefing, with a side visit to the EU. Bulgaria was among the first members of NATO's Partners for Peace program, never officially dubbed a stepping stone to NATO membership, but seen as that by PfP members. Bulgaria was among the earliest in the region to host joint exercises with NATO and later provided bases for our efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq, where they also had a military presence. In fact, a Bulgarian was just killed by the terrorists in Iraq. There was so much enthusiasm for NATO, that even the socialists, when they were in power, had to pay lip service it.

Bulgarian had an analogous attitude toward EU membership. They realized that as difficult as it would be to qualify for NATO membership, it would be a snap compared to the transition to the European Union. A huge number of Bulgarian laws had to be written or changed before they could be deemed seriously candidates for the EU. Unofficially, as

they saw PfP a step toward NATO membership, so did they see NATO membership as something identifying them as a serious participant in a very Western organization, crucial to the foreign policy, and a possible step toward the EU. Again, even the socialists had a grudging enthusiasm for both. The realists among them knew it was their future.

Q: Did Bulgarians compare their situation vis-à-vis the West to that of the other former Soviet bloc countries? Did they check their progress against that of the others?

PLOTKIN: To a certain degree, yes, and with some envy of places like Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic which were geographically closer to the West, had more direct experience with western institutions, and which were more affluent. Another great advantage that the Poles, Hungarians and, perhaps, the Czechs had was their successful and relatively wealthy immigrants in the U.S. and Western European, able and willing to provide them with capital and expertise. Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia have much less to draw on along those lines.

Bulgarians also watched what was happening in the aftermath of the various approaches to economic reform in the region. They chose a slow evolution to rewriting the economic rules in comparison to going cold turkey as did Poland. It may have been a mistake

Q: Was there much of an entrepreneurial spirit in Bulgaria?

PLOTKIN: There was, but there were impediments to its expression. First, most of the major industrial institutions in the country had been manufacturing essentially second rate goods for the Soviet Bloc market which had no choice but to take what they could get. These plants found themselves suddenly unable to compete with products now available from the west. That led to rising unemployment as the plants shut down. One prime example was the computer industry which had been exporting computers from Bulgaria. Their computers weren't able to compete with Western quality computers.

Then there was a problem within the government itself as it tried to determine how to privatize government-owned business and at what pace. From our point of view, they moved too slowly and with far more influence of cronyism and organized crime than ought to have been allowed. It was a combination of an honest attempt to slow the growth of unemployment and wide-spread corruption.

The best of the entrepreneurial spirit was operating on a local, small business basis, but both the government and criminal elements thwarted expansion. Small businesses were constrained to remain small to avoid paying a high rate of taxes and to avoid the notice of the criminal protection racket. A mom and pop store might hope to succeed in a modest way without much notice, but should it try to expand, open a second outlet, it was put at risk. There was a strong disincentive to expanding your Starbucks nationwide.

Q: Was there any sort of McDonaldsization in Bulgaria?

PLOTKIN: There was a fast food invasion. McDonalds, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, and Mr. Donut all had outlets in Sofia when we were there, and they were expanding throughout the country. There was, to my knowledge, no equivalent Bulgarian fast food chain that could successfully compete.

Q: You mentioned the man who led the movement for NATO membership, Solomon Passy. Is he Jewish and is there much of a Jewish community there?

PLOTKIN: He is. The Bulgarian Jewish community is small today though Bulgarian Jews largely survived WWII and the Nazis. Depending on who spins history, you hear different views of the actions of Bulgaria regarding its Jewish population in the Second World War. As I mentioned earlier, Bulgaria, largely for regional political reasons, was an ally of Germany. The Bulgarian Jewish population was identified and isolated during the Second World War and there was some forced labor. But Germany never occupied Bulgaria; they were allies and the Bulgarian royal family was of German origin. As a result, Bulgaria's WWII history was the opposite of that experienced by Yugoslavia.

Bulgaria did have to cooperate with the Nazis and was, it seems, perfectly willing to send the very substantial Jewish population of what is now Macedonian Greece to the death camps. However, when it came to Bulgarian Jews, despite the fact that they were being abused within Bulgaria at the time, when the Nazis ordered their shipment to the death camps, there were protests, led partly by the Bulgarian Orthodox church and partly by civic minded people. In brief, they refused to cooperate and Bulgaria's Jewish population survived the Germans and the war.

The community is small now because after the war and the communist takeover, many moved either to Israel or west. There is something of a Jewish revival today. When we were there, they were working to complete the restoration of the main synagogue in Sofia and had a rededication ceremony attended by everyone from the president of Bulgaria and the head of the Bulgarian Orthodox church to members of the Israeli Parliament and our ambassador, Avis Bohlen. As it is an Orthodox synagogue, she and Ruth had to sit upstairs, while I was among the all male dignitaries in the front rows. The event was given very positive front page coverage in the media.

As a Jew in the Foreign Service I've had really seen two extremes in Eastern Europe. In Poland, I always felt a basic anti-Semitism. I don't accuse all Poles because that would be insane, but more than once I had the sentiment quoted to me that, while Hitler was awful, at least he solved the Jewish problem. In contrast, early in my tour in Belgrade I was backstage at one of the major theater companies there talking to a group of actors and directors. Afterwards one of the actresses came up to me and said, "Are you Jewish?" I said, "Yes." She embraced me and said, "My grandmother was Jewish." I had this kind of experience eight or a dozen times in Serbia and Bulgaria. There simply was a very different attitude. No doubt there were Serbs and Bulgarians there who thought of Jews as Christ killers, but overall there was an acceptance of Jews as a part of the scene and of value. I think this was largely bred by that hated 500 years of the Ottoman Empire. It was

the Ottoman Empire that accepted almost all of the Jews thrown out of Iberia in 1492. Most ended up the Balkans and accommodation to living under the Ottomans made it possible for Jews and Orthodox Christians to live together in ways that never worked as well in the Protestant and Catholic west.

Q: Was Bulgaria a tourist destination? I think of the Black Sea and the beaches.

PLOTKIN: Bulgaria is a beautiful country, with mountains, beautiful rivers, the sea and its beaches. It has great tourism potential. People who come there tend to be surprised by its beauty and by the hospitality of the Bulgarian people. For us, it was clearly the most hospitable place we ever served. It was the country where we most quickly went from being invited because we were the political counselor or the counselor for public affairs to being invited because we were Ruth and Larry. We have sustained friendships from there more than from anyplace else. Bulgarians will spend so much of their resources entertaining you that you almost wince at the level of hospitality.

Q: How did you cope as a guest being loaded with food with more food than you eat?

PLOTKIN: It was both wonderful and sometimes overwhelming. You did the best of course to reciprocate, of course. Bulgaria is not well known in the West. The bulk of their tourists have been from the northern part of the Soviet Bloc, Poles, Germans and Russians seeking sunshine. Until they have better infrastructure to bring people into the country, I think it will stay that way. You can fly in and out of Sofia easily, but travel elsewhere can be difficult. They also need to up-grade the resort facilities you find once you get to the beach or mountains.

Q: Back to Jews, were they largely Sephardic?

PLOTKIN: Yes. Most of them came from Spain and Portugal. There were Ashkenazi Jews who had immigrated from places like Russia, but they were the minority within the minority. In fact, I had occasion to use my Spanish in Bulgaria on a couple of occasions when I met older Sephardic Jews still spoke Ladino which relates to Spanish in a way similar to the relation between Yiddish and German. I could be understood in Spanish and understand much of their Ladino.

Q: We haven't talked about Russian influence. Was there much Russian influence there?

PLOTKIN: Nothing like it had been of course. As I said earlier, Bulgarians have never had an incentive to hate the Russians. Just the opposite. They appreciate Russia for its role in ending the control of the Balkans by the Turks and, unlike other countries in the region, were had Russian troops on their land.

Q: When the Russian troops came through Yugoslavia, they raped and looted.

PLOTKIN: I know, but that never happened in Bulgaria. The result is that their

relationship was and remains good. Obviously the relationship has changed because Bulgaria is both dealing with a changed Russia and also with a variety of other countries with which they share the Black Sea. One of the other things which involved the Embassy from behind the scenes was the development of a Black Sea cooperative organization bringing the countries bordering the Black Sea into an organization to deal with everything from transportation to pollution of the sea.

Q: Were you there during the street demonstrations?

PLOTKIN: They marched right by my office everyday. I would look out of my window and people who knew me would wave. One of the real influences on the Bulgarian opposition was the student movement in Belgrade which was in the streets before and during the same time period. As Ruth said, they showed Bulgarians that they could change things in an extra legal fashion through peaceful demonstrations. The Bulgarians took their cue from that and even emulated some of the semi-comical street theater that the students were doing in Belgrade. It was peaceful and good-spirited, with the exception of one night at the parliament building in Sofia where the face-off between police and demonstrators turned violent. Ruth and I just missed the action. We had been there mingling in the crowd and observing. We left an hour or so before things got hot.

Q: What happened?

PLOTKIN: People took over the parliament building, began to ransack it and inspired the inevitable police response. It was a little bit messy, a few people were hurt, but no one was killed. It was nothing like it could have been because the Bulgarian army decided to remain neutral and by remaining neutral allowed the political process to take place without interfering. That was very much a good thing.

Q: How did we view this? Did we welcome a change or did we not give a damn?

PLOTKIN: Professionally and officially we kept our distance and stayed neutral. As individuals and as an organization we were all rooting for the change. We were not getting the cooperation we thought we ought to have from the socialists and could see a bad economic situation was getting worse. We looked forward to a government that we could better partner and that would move forward Bulgaria's reforms and Westernization, prosperity, the rule of law. We never spoke out publicly in favor of a change of government, but among ourselves our sympathies were clear.

Q: By the time you left, was a new government in place and did it work better?

PLOTKIN: Yes and yes. One example was the educational exchange agreement I mentioned earlier. And there were others. There was a Peace Corps agreement that had also been in suspension. There was new movement on such agreements and certainly a major change just in the atmospherics of doing business with the new government. It affected the Embassy and it affected other western institutions in Bulgaria like AUBG

and the American college. Did Ruth or I mention the American college?

Q: You mentioned the American University.

PLOTKIN: They are two different and separate institutions, AUBG and the American College. The College is a high school that was started in Sofia in the 1860s. It was founded by the same people who founded Roberts College in Istanbul, and, like Roberts College, was an elite high school, the school to which the wealthiest Bulgarians sent their kids. World War II caused the school to suspend operation and the communist government that followed shut it down. But the religious association that ran the college kept its small endowment intact. In the interim the college campus was turned over to the interior ministry which, you understand, was not the home of tree huggers but rather that of the domestic police. In 1990 or '91, after the communists were deposed, the board of the American College approached the new, democratically elected government and asked for their campus back, arguing that it had been taken from them illegally. A compromise was reached that gave them back about half of the campus. They restored the first of the building returned to them and took in their first students in fall 1993, 100 ninth graders. They were chosen, not now for their wealth, but through an open, merit-based competition, the only pre-competition criterion was to have a class that was 50 young men and 50 young women. Each year thereafter they brought in another 100 students for a total of 400. The school is secular, classes are all, at least in theory, taught in English, but the curriculum is that of the Bulgarian school system.

When we were assigned to Sofia, we thought that our older daughter, Anya, would go to school there, but there were problems from the beginning. They ranged from the fact that she was not strong in the sciences and she was entering as a 10th grader and, therefore, behind the curve, to the fact that the math textbook was in Bulgarian and the Bulgarian students were xenophobic and were not inclined to accept the presence of non-Bulgarian students in the college. At the end of one semester and with great sadness we transferred her to the TASIS School just outside of London. She had an emotionally difficult first semester having come in midway through the 10th grade, but then a wonderfully successful 11th and 12th grades.

The silver lining was the plus for our younger daughter, Alison. She spent her first year in Sofia in the Anglo-American school which ran through the 8th grade, and then went on to the College – with two major advantages. She was stronger in math and sciences and she entered as a 9th grader with a whole new group of students from all around Bulgaria, all strangers to each other. She had little social problem as a foreigner and with some help from a math and physics tutor, she finished two years at the College with a 5.6 grade average out of 6. When we returned to the States, she asked us to make her high school graduation present a trip back to Bulgaria.

Half the teachers at the College were American and half Bulgarian. As I said, they taught the standard Bulgarian high school curriculum, which meant 12 different subjects a week. Students took physics, chemistry, biology and geology all four years, not a year of one

and a year of the other. In addition, they studied three languages, Bulgarian, English and a foreign language. And they took courses in literature and mathematics and a couple electives. It was very intense, but it enabled Alison to come back to Fairfax County and be in the first cohort at George Marshall High School to study for the international baccalaureate, IB, degree. Of the 25 kids who started out in the program, she was one of only nine who finished the program and earned the IB degree. Both of our daughters did very well academically, had great SAT scores. As a footnote, the first graduating class of the American College in 1997 had an average SAT score higher than that of the entering class of Harvard that year, and, of course, took the exam in English, not Bulgarian.

Q: What happened when you left in '97?

PLOTKIN: In 1997, we returned to Washington. Under normal circumstances we would have wished to stay overseas, but the difficulty doing so as a tandem combined with the place and time and education of our daughters, pretty much dictated a return to the States. I was assigned to USIA's European Area Office, EU, as Deputy Policy Officer responsible for Eastern Europe and the Balkans. I spent 1997-98 at USIA, its last year as an independent agency, and the rest my assignment in the Department. EUR was the first USIA entity to move to State, making the move in October, 1998, becoming EUR/PA.

Q: How old were your daughters at that time?

PLOTKIN: Our older daughter, Anna, was about to turn eighteen and to enter Northwestern; our younger daughter, Alison, almost 16 and about to enter the 11th grade. Our willingness to return to the U.S. was partly because we felt that it would be good for her to complete high school in the United States Fortunately, as I mentioned earlier, the high school that she attended was just introducing the IB degree and she joined the first cohort to go through the program.

Q: How did the USIA merger into State go? USIA is often more nuts and bolts than policy.

PLOTKIN: The timing, at least for EU, was good. Mark Grossman was running EUR, the European bureau, at State at the time and he had a serious interest and appreciation for public diplomacy and what it could accomplish. He very much involved those of us from USIA in ongoing policy discussions from the beginning, both regarding the making of policy and its implementation.

My work ranged widely from issues regarding our AID and Democracy Commission programs to interagency meetings regarding the role of public diplomacy in bring peace to the former Yugoslavia, to radio and TV broadcasts into Bosnia and Serbia, to support for Serbia's opposition media and students' movement, and more.

Q: How were we getting to these students? There were nightly demonstrations in Belgrade at that time.

PLOTKIN: There were, almost day and night. With our embassy evacuated twice, we often had no official presence in Serbia. To compensate, we set up "offshore" operations, working out of Budapest and Vienna. It was often possible for opposition Serbs to get out to places like Hungary and Austria and that enabled western organizations wishing to train, fund, and help guide their efforts to work reasonably closely with them. We were able to run some of our normal programs like professional exchanges, from outside of Serbia with some success. We continued to bring people to the States and countries nearer to Serbia for orientation and training, especially in the media.

Q: Were we doing anything with television?

PLOTKIN: It was a matter of what we could do, or, more accurately, what dissident Serbs in Belgrade and elsewhere could get away with. We helped them with equipment, training, and program material, but a significant amount of the equipment we tried to get to them disappeared, obviously into the hands of the government. Further, anybody in opposition was at genuine physical risk. Some were merely harassed, some beaten and imprisoned, and a few murdered. It was very dangerous for the people involved, but we would did everything we could to support them, not so much directing them because we were already in agreement about what needed to be done, but in terms of trying to keep them encouraged and equipped for the job they'd taken on.

Q: Did you coordinate with the Voice of America?

PLOTKIN: We coordinated closely with VOA and with the military. The military had planes that could fly over the area and broadcast TV and radio signals into Bosnia and Serbia. An interagency group in which I was a regular participant was constantly reviewing the process of both broadcasting into Serbia from the air and of setting up broadcast towers in places nearby in Bosnia. We talked about setting up broadcasts towers Northwest Bulgaria and Hungary, anywhere from which they could effectively beam a signal into Serbia. Some of that construction was successful, though I don't believe we ever set up anything in Bulgaria. We were attempting to get as much information into Serbia about the opposition and about the situation in Bosnia as possible to counter the government controlled media which told the Serbian people only what Milosevic's government wanted them to know or believe.

Q: Did you get involved in Bosnia?

PLOTKIN: Once the Dayton Accords were signed, we worked in ways similar to our efforts elsewhere in the region, building programs to stabilize and democratize the country, to create a free and responsible media, reestablishing professional and educational exchange programs, and to create the basis of a civil society. We were also deeply, if less dramatically, involved in similar programs in the less violent, newly independent parts of the former Yugoslavia, in Macedonia, in Croatia, to a lesser extent in Slovenia, and, of course, in Montenegro.

Q: Were we trying to split Montenegro from Yugoslavia?

PLOTKIN: That was never our official position nor do I think we tried to foster a split in any underhanded way, though there were, no doubt, some in the administration who would have supported a split. Our official position was it was better to have Montenegro still connected to Serbia just as it was better not officially to encourage the separation of Kosovo from Serbia. That issue demands resolution, but seems to be on indefinite hold.

As to Montenegro, we did support its quasi-official autonomy and the dissent there from the positions taken by Milosevic. Some aid and exchange programs were enhanced in Montenegro even as they were curtailed or canceled in Serbia. The problem of Kosovo is much more complex. Kosovo has always been seen by the Serbs as the center of their national history. Keeping Kosovo as part of Serbia is an emotional imperative. But the population there has long been dominantly Albanian and if you held a plebiscite in Kosovo to decide between independence and continuing as a part of Serbia, there would be something like 80-90% vote for independence. Almost the entire Albanian population would vote for independence; the pro-Serbia vote would largely to cast by those Serbs still living in Kosovo. Our official position favors maintaining established political borders, but it's impossible to imagine the Albanian Kosovars ever again submitting to rule from Belgrade.

Q: What was your role in all of this? Did you have money and did you have plans?

PLOTKIN: I went to endless meetings on Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia. We had funding available to support our programs there and worked very closely with our people in the field and with the program officers at USIA to make those programs work. I also spent a lot of time writing options papers. I was deeply involved in the creation of the Stability Pact and wrote most of the speech President Clinton gave on his visit to Sarajevo after the Dayton Accords were signed and at which he announced the creation of the Stability Pact.

Q: Were there in Washington a lot of old Yugoslav hands sitting around the table?

PLOTKIN: Absolutely. Our presence in the old Yugoslavia had been substantial – a good-sized embassy, a consulate in Zagreb, USIA centers in all six republics, each run by an FSO and with substantial FSN staffs. That gave USIA, AID and the Department a deep pool of expertise to draw from, people who had language ability and contacts in the country. In addition, most of us had wonderful tours of duty there and were dismayed at the turn of events. There was a really deep sentiment for helping to end the violence and resolve the issues as quickly and peaceably as possible.

Still, a lot of the old hands were overseas in ongoing assignments and some had retired, so we didn't have an excess of old hands hanging around the department seeking to get involved. In fact, in order to staff some of the labor-intense projects in which we were involved, we brought people out of retirement on a WAE basis. They filled jobs both in

Washington and, for a period, as acting PAO in Belgrade.

By the time I got involved in '97, most of the policies had been decided. The Clinton administration had been in place for some time, so there were no dramatic policy shifts toward the Balkans while I was there. Debate tended to focus on what could be done in the region as against some ideal of what we might like to have done.

Every time we faced dramatic events in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, especially liberating events like the fall of the wall, the creation of 15 "new" countries out of the USSR and five out of the former Yugoslavia, there was the same divergence of expectations and opinion. Administration officials, especially political appointees in USIA and State, had what most FSOs saw as very Pollyannaish views on how quickly things could be done and how much immediate impact the changes would have. In short, they seemed, though not without exception, to think that once the countries of Eastern Europe were free, their citizens would immediately become democrats and capitalists. Those of us who had served in the area knew that bureaucracies were entrenched, that whole generation hadn't any experience with democracy and capitalism, that the structures of civil society, of rule of law had to be created, and that we could not simply pull products off the U.S. shelf and expect those products to work in other cultures. I could go on, but I'm beginning to rant.

FSOs and other serious students of the region were right, of course, and the reforms we have fostered in the region have taken longer to institute and have taken more hard work and patience than some anticipated. In the long term, the process is taking hold. In the short term, there was a real need to try to impose, I hate the phrase, a reality check on those people whose enthusiasm was admirable, but whose sense of what could be done, how quickly it could be done and how people out there would react was unrealistic.

Q: Did you deal with any of the rest of Eastern Europe or only with the Balkans?

PLOTKIN: Theoretically, I dealt with all of Eastern Europe, excepting the former Soviet Union for which a separate office in State had responsibility. There were times when I did deal with issues regarding the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and the other countries north of Romania, but those countries were so comparatively stable and were progressing democratically and economically in the ways so much better than in the Balkans that they took up a relatively small percentage of my time. It was the Balkans for breakfast, lunch and dinner, with side dishes of Greece, Turkey and Hungary, countries that were often seen as part of the solution to the problems in the region.

Q: In Eastern Europe, were we trying to replicate the success of our America House program in Germany after the war?

PLOTKIN: The American Centers we had in each of the republics of Yugoslavia were created on the model of the America House, with computer information centers, libraries, programming facilities that hosted everything from exhibits to lectures by visiting

American scholars - all the usual programs. They were also involved in academic and professional exchanges and working with local media. Our centers in the others countries of the region operated on a much quieter level, largely because of limits placed on us by the communist governments there in power.

But aside from the expansion throughout Yugoslavia in the years following Tito's break with Moscow, there USIA never the level of funding that was available to support our efforts in places like Germany after World War II. There was some expansion of USIS programs during the '90s in almost all of these countries immediately after the fall of the communist governments; increases in educational and professional exchanges, of the programming we could import into the country, and in our ability to work with the media. By the time I retired in 2000, those increases were dwindling away everywhere except in the former Yugoslavia. Our overall budget was in decline and the only way we could maintain a degree of stability in funding for trouble spots was to bleed resources from more stable countries in Europe.

That process began during my year in personnel, 1990-91. The Soviet Union collapsed and suddenly we were told we had to have a public affairs officers and resource centers in each of the newly-freed countries of the former USSR, and consulates with Branch PAOs in places like Yekaterinburg and Vladivostok. Where are they going to come from? No one in the Latin American Bureau or elsewhere was going to give up positions. Our only recourse was to raid larger Western European posts. There wasn't a major Western European embassy that didn't lose USIA officers and resource funding. All were cut in order for us to increase our presence in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Q: What else did you do after your return from Bulgaria?

PLOTKIN: That was it. Three years of work on the Balkans and then retirement. At the beginning of what proved our last tour in Washington, we thought we might go overseas one last time, possibly in 2000. Both of our daughters would have been in college then and we felt free to please ourselves.

Q: What was your perspective on the absorption of USIA into the State Department?

PLOTKIN: As I said, I thought it in general a hostile takeover. It had real impact on what I did on a day to day basis. I found myself spending less time on program implementation and more on policy issues. Working on programs has the advantage of more immediate gratification. You can actually see things done and have a product in hand at the end of the day. Policy issues tend seldom, if ever, to be resolved and, as a mid-level officer, your ability to influence policy is limited. There was also real frustration in moving into a much larger bureaucracy; suddenly, anything I wanted to get done took authorization from many more people. That was further exacerbated by the even greater number of people involved because I was working on high profile issues.

Q: Did you run across the bureaucratic response that, the fancier and more immediate

the issue, the more you got interest from the top? Usually more interference than help.

PLOTKIN: Even when goodwill abounded and no interference or malice was intended, it caused delay. Discussions were endless; everybody had a shot at every piece of paper you wrote partly because of the high profile of the Balkans. I was frequently at NSC-led interagency working groups with representatives of the White House, Pentagon, AID and State, CIA and other interested agencies, all deeply interested and involved in what was going on. While the meetings were rarely confrontational, they certainly made everything more difficult to accomplish, even when, in the end, a consensus was reached.

Q: How did you think things were going?

PLOTKIN: I think many of us who served in the former Yugoslavia felt deep despair, if that's not too strong a word, especially early in the break up of the country and as the violence continued on far beyond what many of us had anticipated. That sense of despair lifted little by little as the violence abated, but the sense of loss of possibilities remains. There was also a very strong sense among some of us that it will be a long time before the three major populations in Bosnia ever reconcile and find a way to coexist in a peaceful democratic society rather than in a country essentially partitioned among the Croats, the Serbs and Bosniacs. That, the ongoing extreme nationalism in Serbia and, to some extent, in Croatia are also factors that none of us can be optimistic about. While there was some satisfaction in seeing universities return to something approaching normal, in the creation of free media, however, irresponsible, and in seeing some of the worst malefactors being brought to justice, there was no sense of euphoria at the war's end.

Q: Many old Yugoslav hands are unreconstructed Serbophiles. Personally, I found myself appalled at what the Serbs and the Croats did. I didn't find myself identifying with what were in fact barbaric acts. Did you find any of this?

PLOTKIN: Of course I cannot condone Serbian atrocities, but I do have a genuine fondness for most of the Serbs I know. On a personal basis they are a wonderfully hospitable people. I was comfortable with them as individuals and in groups, at least until subjects like Kosovo came up. I'm sure I mentioned that even among many of the best educated, urbane and internationally experienced Serbs, there was a knee-jerk reaction the minute you mentioned Kosovo and Albanians, a reaction similar to that of Southerners in 1960 to the subject of blacks. It was an astonishing thing to experience, the way the mention of Kosovo simply threw a switch in their heads and made them irrational. Lots of Serbs felt much the same way about Croats and Croats that way about Serbs. Of course, there was some historical basis for this, but rather than working to resolve the issues, they nurtured their real and perceived injuries, keeping the wounds open because "We mustn't forget!" It was ultimately self-destructive. Some old hands did try to make excuses for the Serbs, some who had served in Zagreb tried to make similar allowances for the Croats, and some, I felt, blindly espoused the Kosovo Albanian cause, all closing their eyes to the complexities of the issues and the atrocities committed on all sides.

As soon as the Albanians had the opportunity, they started abusing any Serb they could find. The Kosovars were not saints who were being martyred. They were like almost every other unreconstructed group of nationalists. In my three years working the issues, I certainly encountered more pro-Kosovo people in Washington than pro-Serbian far and understandably so. The Kosovars were, after all, the more greatly abused, the Serbs the principal abusers.

Q: What happened in 2000?

PLOTKIN: It became increasingly clear that our getting a tandem assignment overseas was going to be difficult if not impossible. We wanted Ruth, if she was going to go overseas again, to look for a DCM position and knew it would be impossible for me to be PAO if my spouse was DCM. There are fictions you can create to finesse the issue, but the more we really looked at it, the less it seemed a great idea. I did not much enjoy my last three years in the Foreign Service; working in Washington was never a pleasure for me. It was often less stressful than working overseas, but never as rewarding. I never left the office elated by my day's work. That happened overseas with some frequency.

The larger the bureaucracy I have to cope with the more frustrated I am. Basically I figured it was time for me to take the lead and resign before they threw me out. So in summer 2000, I retired. Even before I did so they said, "Larry, we want you back as a WAE."

Q: What is a WAE?

PLOTKIN: It stands for While Actually Employed. There is a system for bring retired officers back as rehired annuitants. They pay you literally "while employed," that is, on an hourly basis. There was going to be a gap in the job I was leaving and there was going to be a gap in the embassy in Zagreb so I came back just a couple of weeks after I retired, spent six weeks in my old job in EUR/PA, and a month as acting PAO in Zagreb in the late summer of 2000.

Q: How did you find Zagreb?

PLOTKIN: Zagreb was great. It was August so business was fairly slow. I was not exactly stressed out by the amount of work I had to do in that month. I knew a high percentage of the staff there from when I had served in Yugoslavia. While it was not quite a coming home, it was a comfortable and familiar place. There was one major difference from the old days. When I went to Zagreb in the late 1980s, they tolerated my Serbian accent. This time around, nobody wanted to hear me speak because I sounded like a Serb. I was told "Larry, just speak English. We'll translate for you if necessary." What I had regarded as my Serbo-Croatian was by then simply my Serbian, the language of the enemy. But I could still read the newspapers and watch television.

Q: Tudjman had gone?

PLOTKIN: Tudjman had gone and a more democratic, westward-oriented government was in place. There were a lot of programs going on through State, AID and other agencies. It was a very active post.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

PLOTKIN: Bill Montgomery, who I had served under in Sofia as well, but he was not there most of the time because at that point he was spending his time in Budapest running the our embassy to Serbia in exile, or perhaps our embassy in waiting. He later reopened our embassy in Belgrade after the fall of the Milosevic government. In Zagreb, Chuck English, the DCM, was charge' for almost all of the time I was there.

Q: Did you enjoy the cafe life of Zagreb?

PLOTKIN: Oh, yes. The place was really bustling. The city was beautiful. The only pall on the situation was that everybody at the embassy knew that the wonderful downtown location of the embassy was doomed. A site for a new embassy had been chosen out by the airport literally in the middle of a cornfield without a shop or a restaurant within sight. The staff, U.S. and Croatian alike, were in despair over losing the ease of transportation, the ability to step out the door at lunchtime and have a nice lunch at a cafe, the ability to step out the door at the end of the day and do some shopping on the way home, all of these things they were going to lose. Whatever the more serious bilateral issues of the day, this was on everybody's mind and no one except our security people was happy about.

Q: They really would be happy to put us all in Iowa.

PLOTKIN: Surrounded by barbed wire and a minefield and the sea and sharks.

Q: What was Ruth up to?

PLOTKIN: Ruth spent our first year back at the War College and then was in "drugs and thugs" for two years. She continued working after I retired. In 2000, she move on to an assignment in International Organizations and, in 2002, to EUR/ACE. That proved to be her last assignment. I actually preceded her in EUR/ACE because not long after I returned from Zagreb, I was asked again to return as a WAE to handle the democracy cable for the Stability Pact office in EUR/ACE.

EUR/ACE managed all of our assistance programs to the former Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union and coordinated all of our programs with other funders like the EU, Canada and Japan. It supervised the distribution of program resources, initially among State, USIA and AID, and eventually also to other agencies like Justice. There were two parts to ACE, one dealing with the former Soviet Union and the other with Eastern Europe, but predominantly with the Balkans. I worked there for several months before I really, fully

retired in the summer of 2002. I have not been back since. Early on I had several phone calls offering me WAE assignments, including one in Afghanistan, which I choose not to do. As far as the Department goes, I'm fully retired.

Q: What have you been doing?

PLOTKIN: Several things. I am a docent at the Folger Shakespeare Library where I help on education outreach programs, give tours of the library, write for the Docent newsletter, and, starting this fall, will be the trainer for the new docent class. New docents have to take a two-month, two-and-a-half hours twice a week refresher course on the facility itself, on Shakespeare, and on the history of his time.

Once a year, at the Folger open house, I even get dressed up in Elizabethan garb, but I don't play Shakespeare. I am a mere attendant lord and escort for the docent playing Queen Elizabeth. Basically, my work at the Folger is a return to my academic roots. My degrees are all in English literature and I taught at a branch of Indiana University for five years before I joined the Foreign Service. When I retired, one of the things I wanted to do was to spend some of my time doing something I enjoyed, while also doing some good. I've found a home at the Folger.

I volunteer for the Fairfax County Park Authority as well, assisting the coordinator for volunteers and special events. I do some minor fund-raising to support our programs that fund the participation of underprivileged and homeless children in the county parks' summer programs for kids. We also have an extensive program of concerts in the parks and, putting on my PAO hat, I write every press release for every concert.

I also go to the gym many times a week and try to keep myself fit. I take great pleasure reading whole books without falling asleep after five pages. And I have the time at the end of a hard day to take a nap when I feel like it.

Q: Just for the record Larry is also being recruited to do oral histories for us.

PLOTKIN: I find volunteering very satisfying. I've been asked a couple of times about retirement in the Washington area. It is perfectly clear to me that there are so many opportunities to volunteer that unless you're a masochist and enjoy pain, you can find volunteer opportunities that allow you to use the talent you've got in places where you enjoy spending your time, and still to do some good in the world. There are endless kinds of volunteer opportunities here. I get a great deal of satisfaction from what I'm doing and it's enough to structure my days so that I have a reason to get up in the morning other than wanting breakfast. It's great. I'm enjoying it all.

Q: Okay, well, I want to thank you very much.

End of interview