

LATVIA

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EARL PACKER Consul General Riga/Tallinn, Estonia (1922-1925)

Earl Packer was born in Utah in 1894. His career in the Foreign Service included positions in the Soviet Union, Hungary, the United Kingdom (Ireland), Turkey, Burma, and Tunisia. Mr. Packer was interviewed by Paul McCusker on October 27, 1988.

Q: Well, as a lawyer myself, I quite agree with you; it's, at least intellectually, very satisfying. Earl, you were in Washington for about 11 years, between 1925 and 1936. Then in 1936 you went back to Riga.

PACKER: That's right. The Riga office was looked upon as a research organization. And owing to the difficulties in Moscow--housing, and personnel that are taken care of in normal capitals--they simply didn't exist in Moscow. And the function of the legation in Riga--Russian-wise--was primarily research on subjects that were agreed upon between the embassy and ourselves; or perhaps by direction from the Department as to something they would like.

You see, we had a staff of translators, and local employees--as well as officers of the Service--who had some knowledge of Russian. I became the head--in my capacity in the Riga office--I became the head of the Russian research section. Baltic problems were handled with the local governments.

The minister to Latvia, of course, was also the minister to Estonia. And he used to go up to Tallinn occasionally. Then I became the chargé d'affaires in Latvia.

Q: But the post was essentially a research post?

PACKER: Only as concerned Russia.

Q: Because Latvia had not yet been incorporated.

PACKER: Well, we had some very competent, local people who were, of course, anti-Bolshevik. We got the Soviet newspapers through a courier--newspapers and other publications--from Moscow. We had a courier service worked out, between the legation and the embassy in Moscow. They took care of handling these publications, which were then available to our staff in Riga, for research purposes.

Q: Right. Earl, let me ask you this: the recognition of the Soviet Union government--by the United States--could you sense in Latvia--or did this come up--any disappointment on the part of the local staff in the Riga legation, over the fact that the United States had recognized the Soviet Union?

PACKER: I'm trying to remember when recognition actually occurred.

Q: I think it was 1933, wasn't it?

PACKER: Yes, I think it was in '33. So by the time I went up there--in '36 . . . Well, yes, of course the very fact of recognition of the Soviet government brought the establishment of a mission in Moscow, for the first time. I can't recall anything particular there.

Q: My question really is, did you sense--in Riga--any disappointment in the action by the United States, in recognizing the Soviet Union? Did the Latvians feel that they may have been better off?

PACKER: I think they took it as a normal thing. You see, we were slower than the British and the French. I don't know; I don't recall conversations on the subject. But my assumption would be that they rather welcomed it as it would probably result in a greater security for themselves as independent states.

Now, of course, the present situation is--I should think--a terrible headache for Gorbachev; with what's happening in the Baltic states, and out in Central Asia.

Q: Okay, Earl, that's all right. Let me go back to your days in Riga, between 1936 and 1940. I understand that the main figure in Latvia, at that time, was a man named Karlis Ulmanis.

PACKER: Yes, Karlis Ulmanis; and he had a lot of contacts with the States. I think he had spent some time in the States, before independence. The foreign minister was a chap named Munters, who was a very unusual person; very likeable, and a remarkable linguist. He spoke several languages; he spoke English extremely well. And he was very close to Ulmanis.

Q: Ulmanis was a very powerful figure; I understand he was a virtual dictator?

PACKER: Pretty nearly that, yes. I don't recall having any occasion to discuss matters with him. We had a minister there. I was the first secretary; and we had a minister there--Jack Wiley. He carried on the top level talks with Ulmanis, and with Munters, too, naturally.

EDWARD L. KILLHAM
Consular Officer
Moscow, USSR (1956-1959)

Edward L. Killham was born in Illinois in 1926. He received a bachelor's degree from Northwestern University in 1949, a master's degree from Columbia University in 1950, and a master's degree in public administration from Harvard University in 1957. Mr. Killham joined the U.S. Army during World War II and served from 1944-1946 in Europe. His Foreign Service career included positions in the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, Belgium, Austria, and Spain. Mr. Killham was interviewed by Robert Martens on December 18, 1992.

Q: Yes. One of the things that I think is particularly interesting, and I have brought this up with some of your colleagues as well, is the degree to which one could get at real Russian people in this period. Most of this contact came from travel. People were much more ready to speak out in the provinces. In Moscow they tended to know that Big Brother was watching them all the time. Elsewhere they were possibly somewhat more naive and spoke to us. I know you had some interesting trips. I recall one was to the Baltic States. I think you were the first one in there because the Baltic States had been a closed area since World War II up until whenever that was--1957 or '58. You and someone else, I remember, went out and had quite an interesting trip. Maybe you could talk about that a bit.

KILLHAM: Yes. As a matter of fact we weren't the first, we were shortly after the first. Dave Mark visited Riga, Latvia a few weeks before us and got to know the Intourist guide there, Johnny Westmanis, who was very agreeable and very Latvian and quite outspoken about Latvia's unhappy history. When Dick Harmstone and I got to Riga he was our guide also. Westmanis was later evidently pressured into denouncing Dave Mark as a spy, which was part of the Soviet case

against Dave and he was expelled. The account was written up in innumerable Soviet volumes describing the evil ways of Western spies in the Soviet Union.

But Dick and I had a number of remarkable contacts. You are right that it was easier to talk to people outside Moscow. It was even easier, at least at that stage, if you were not trying to speak to Russians. We had much greater success in the minority areas, such as the Baltics.

The first night we were there Dick and I wandered downtown, where they had what was reputed to be the only the night club in the USSR, which was on the top floor of the department store. We wandered around the department store a little bit. Dick, fortunately, was quite tall so he was noticeable. We struck up a conversation with a couple of other tall young men who turned out to be the nucleus of the Latvian basketball team. We got very close, indeed, with them. We had some friendly conversation and they asked us to get together the following night, which we did. They took us on a train to the famous white sands beach outside of Riga -- this was in January. We went walking with them--about four or five of them and two of us--along the snow-covered beach, closely pursued by a group of obvious KGB tails. We were discussing all sorts of sensitive things--politics, international affairs, the evils of the Soviet system, etc. Our friends knew the immediate area very well and knew the train schedule well also so, at one crucial moment, they said, "We all run now." So we all ran like hell and caught the train just as it was leaving the station in the direction of Riga, leaving the KGB watchers behind us. It probably annoyed our KGB tails enormously.

They took us then to a restaurant, also on the coast, and we ate some of the local specialties and again talked, with more than a few toasts along the way. At one stage, in a very touching episode, one of them who was studying English--he couldn't speak it but he could read it-- pulled out a book containing the American Declaration of Independence and proceeded to read it to us in English. It was really a remarkable scene. Then they bundled us off back to Riga.

We didn't see them again, but the following night we struck up a conversation with a young Latvian musician--only half Latvian, I believe his father was Russian--who had another chap with him. We invited them to come to the night club with us and our guide, Johnny Westmanis, which made both of them rather nervous. But the young musician, an aspiring composer, invited us back to meet his folks. That was the first time I had gotten inside a Soviet apartment. They were quite well fixed. We talked with the parents and had a very pleasant evening. We got some feeling for some of the tensions but also for some of the elements that were bringing the Latvians and the local Russians together.

HANS N. TUCH
Cultural Attaché
Moscow, USSR (1958-1961)

Hans Tuch came to the United States from Germany in 1938 as a 14-year- old. He served in the U.S. Army during World War II and gained enough active combat points to be discharged early. He finished his B.A. at the University of Kansas in

1947, received an MA at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and worked for Chase National Bank. The bank sent him to Germany, where he quit and was immediately hired by the State Department. Mr. Tuch transferred to USIA when it was created in 1953, during his assignment to Germany. Subsequently, he served in Washington, Moscow, Bulgaria, Brazil, other posts in Germany, and as acting director of Voice of America. He was interviewed on January 19, 1988 by Benis Frank, February 24, 1988 by "Cliff" Groce, and on August 4, 1989 by G. Lewis Schmidt.

Q: Did you encounter any of the ethnic differences such as have surfaced many times now, and especially recently? The reason that I ask this is that in my very limited contact with people from the Soviet Union, on a couple of occasions I have made the mistake of saying, "Well, our Russian friend . . ." And had a Ukrainian or a Georgian say, "I am not a Russian! I am Ukrainian, or Georgian!" {Laughter}

TUCH: Many Soviet citizens felt very proud of their ethnic heritage, especially when you went down to a place like Georgia or Armenia. It was less pronounced in places like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, but I'm sure it existed though it was not expressed to us. In Georgia, very much so. It was very, very distinctive whenever we went to the Baltics; Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. During my first year, the three Baltic states were still off limits; they were opened during my tour of duty there. A colleague of mine and I were the first ones to go to Riga, to Latvia, and we spent three or four days there. We found a tremendous amount and intensity of nationalism, nationalist pride and a great deal of antagonism towards their Russian masters. In the Baltics it was very clear; it was very pronounced anti-Soviet, anti-Russian. In Georgia it was less anti-Russian, but very pro-Georgian nationalism. They felt that they were different. They were not Russians, they were Georgians, as you just said. But at that time of course, you did not have any of the ethnic manifestations which have erupted during the last year.

PHILIP H. VALDES
Political Officer
Moscow, USSR (1964-1966)

Philip H. Valdes was born in New York in 1921. He received both a bachelor's degree in 1942 and a master's degree in 1947, both from Yale University. He was a 2nd lieutenant overseas in the U.S. Army from 1943- 1946. Mr. Valdes entered the Foreign Service in 1947, serving in Chungking, Seoul, Moscow, Frankfurt, Paris, Bangkok, Berlin, and Munich. He was interviewed by William Knight on July 11, 1994.

Q: Did you ever have any intimation of the coming cataclysm or revolution in the Soviet Union? That the system really was under such strain that it might be going to fall apart?

VALDES: No. When I was there, we realized that it was under strain, that their economy had very serious problems, and that they were trying to do too much with too little. They were doing

it very inefficiently, but we all thought that they would sort of "muddle along" for quite a while. As I say, I went there for the last time in 1966, except for a month I spent escorting a theater group in 1976. Things hadn't reached that stage [of dissolution] then. In fact, the real "crunch" hadn't occurred because they hadn't really devoted such a great part of their income to armaments, as they did during the last few years under Brezhnev.

As for the geographic breakup of the Soviet Union, I had expected that at some point the Baltic republics [Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania] would break out. And I think that most of the Russians I knew had accepted the idea that the Baltic States would eventually break out. They didn't feel that the Baltic states were theirs by right. I noticed a lot of nationalism in the Ukraine, but mostly in the Western Ukraine, the parts that had been part of Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Q: Now how did you notice that? What was the evidence?

VALDES: Well, when I traveled to Lvov [western Ukraine], I heard more Ukrainian and less Russian. And [there was] the attitude of factory people and managers I talked to. They just seemed a lot more open and pushing to do more than they were able to do.

Q: They wouldn't say, "We can't stand these awful Russians?"

VALDES: In the Baltic States they did say that. They would ask, "When are you going to get the Russians out of here?" In fact, in the Baltic States, one example of this attitude was the Intourist [Soviet tourist bureau] guide we had. The Intourist guide is assigned to Embassy visitors to keep them out of mischief, essentially, and keep them relatively happy--not seeing things they shouldn't see or doing things they shouldn't do. The guide we had was an Estonian.

The first indication of this came when we were sitting in the dining room in Tallinn, working out our program with him. In the course of this discussion I asked him if you could receive Finnish television programs. He said: "Oh, it's very difficult. You need a complicated antenna. Oh, no, it's really very difficult." I let that pass. Later, when we were out in the street, he pointed up to the top of a building and said, "There's one." I said, "One what?" He said, "An antenna for receiving television programs from Helsinki." I looked more carefully and saw a sort of Rube Goldberg thing on the roof. And he said, "Look around." I looked around and saw that every house had one of them. He said, "They're our brothers."

On another occasion we went out to the ruins of a church, outside of Tallinn. It had been destroyed a couple of hundred years ago, I guess. When we got there, he explained that it was done by Latvians. This led him into a dissertation on the evils of the Latvians, which ended with his saying, "And in 1917 they fought with the Bolsheviks against us." Which they did. The Latvians had a rifle regiment that fought with the Bolsheviks.

Anyway, nationalism was very open in the Baltic States--although less so elsewhere. In the Caucasus you had the feeling that the Armenians and the Georgians weren't very happy in the Soviet Union. But I also had a feeling that both the Armenians and the Georgians felt that they could "handle" the Soviets well enough, so they didn't really have a problem.

THOMAS R. HUTSON
Consul General
Moscow, USSR (1978-1980)

Thomas R. Hutson was born in Nebraska in 1939. After receiving his bachelor's degree from the University of Nebraska in 1962 he served in the US Army from 1962-1967. His career has included positions in Teheran, Belgrade, Winnipeg, Moscow, Lagos, Taipei, Belgrade, Bishkek, and Mazar-e-Sharif. Mr. Hutson was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in April 1999.

HUTSON: ... Then I met my to-be-wife. She was from Latvia. She was born in 1941 and left Latvia when the Soviets invaded her country in 1943. Her family fled to Germany where they were encamped there until 1950. Through the Lutheran Church, they immigrated to the U.S. - first to Kansas and then to Nebraska. They ended up in Lincoln, which was the last place that the last president of free Latvia had studied and received a degree in agricultural economics. Lincoln had a sizeable Latvian community.

Q: Did you get a chance to travel around the Soviet Union on business?

HUTSON: To my great regret, no. That was because I worked seven days per week - 24/7. There was just no relief. I did go to Leningrad a couple of times, largely to go to Helsinki. The only time I managed to go on a personal trip to Riga, Latvia. We specifically did not see my wife's relatives. It turned out that while we were there the Latvians celebrated the 60th anniversary of the independence of Free Latvia. That reinforced our - and my wife's especially - disdain for what the Soviets had done in Latvia. That was my only trip within the USSR. I did fly to Washington on several occasions; we had annual consular negotiations with the Soviets and then there were some other work-related matters. The publications procurement office had a travel program and were looking for people to send to various parts of the Soviet Union. But I never had the time.

PATRICIA GATES LYNCH
Ambassador
Comoros and Madagascar (1986-89)

Ambassador Patricia Gates Lynch was raised in Connecticut. She was a reporter for the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the American Forces Network (AFN) from Western Europe, the Soviet Union, Iran, Hungary, Poland, and Turkey. She served on the White House staff as press assistant to Pat Nixon. Pat Gates hosted the Voice of America's "Breakfast Show" for 25 years. In 1986 she was appointed ambassador to Madagascar and Comoro Islands. She was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1992.

Q: Could you tell me just a bit about what you are up to now?

LYNCH: ...I believe in the mission which is to keep the free flow of information going into the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries. Today the mission is, we feel, just as important; those countries feel it is just as important because now they are struggling to solidify a very fragile democracy. And of course there are 15 new countries in the former Soviet Union to which we broadcast (not in English at all) but already we broadcast in 12 of those languages, Russian sufficing for the others. We are the only people in place with all of those languages.

So I went out of Africa into Eastern Europe at a time, late 1989, when everything started to happen. Of course, I love to learn about new things and this has exposed me to a great deal of information about what has been going on on the former Soviet Union scene and these newly developing countries of Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Bulgaria and the three Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

INTS M. SILINS
Ambassador
Latvia (1992-1995)

Ambassador Silins was born in Latvia and raised in Latvia and Maryland. He was educated at Princeton and Harvard Universities. He entered the Foreign Service in 1969 and served abroad in Saigon, Duc Thanh (Vietnam), Bucharest, Stockholm, Port au Prince, Leningrad and Strasbourg. In 1990 he was appointed United States Representative to the Baltic States, resident in Riga, Latvia, and from 1992 to 1995, he served as United States Ambassador to Latvia. He also had several tours of duty at the Department of State in Washington, DC. Ambassador Silins was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in 1998.

SILINS: Yes, at the time of my birth Latvia was being battered from both sides by the two arch-villains of the 20th century, Hitler and Stalin. By the end of World War II, Latvia was to lose not only its independence but roughly a third of its population to execution, deportation or emigration. It was hard to see that this story would have a happy ending. In fact, the day of my birth, March 25, was to become a national day of mourning, to mark the deportation of over 40,000 people to Siberia in 1949. Latvia's story isn't too well known, so perhaps you'll forgive me if I sketch some of the background.

Latvia first won independence in 1920. Just two decades later, it was occupied and annexed by Soviet Russia after a deal between Hitler and Stalin, the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. That occupation was accompanied and followed by executions and deportations and a harsh internal regime that made most Latvians very anxious to avoid a repetition if they could. Germany invaded the following year as Hitler's forces pressed their assault on Soviet Russia. The Germans weren't a great improvement on the Russians. They compelled able-bodied Latvian men, my father among them, to serve on the eastern front. Nevertheless many Latvians,

while they had no love for fascism, saw Germany as the only possible counterforce to Stalin and hoped to develop an independent military force that, with eventual help from the Allies, might keep Russia at bay.

The Germans were in control of Latvia at the time of my birth in 1942. But in 1944 Germany's defeat was looming, as was the likelihood that the Russians would be coming back to re-impose their brutal regime. So when I was just two, my mother and I joined thousands of other Latvians who fled the country as best they could, mostly to Sweden or Germany. We made our way to Germany and ended up spending five years there in various displaced person camps – DP camps, as they were called, eventually in the American zone. My father remained in Latvia with other soldiers holding out in the hope that the Allies would come to their aid. That help did not come. They were taken prisoner by Russian troops and sent to Siberia. A few years later, he died in a Soviet death camp.

Q: You had experience looking at it both from Leningrad and Stockholm. Were you able to talk to the Baltic representatives there, and what were you seeing? Were they on their way, was this your feeling, or was the role of the Soviets so problematic that it was dubious?

SILINS: The independence of the Baltic States was still up in the air. Even today, any person with knowledge of Baltic history realizes that nothing is for sure in that area. On the one hand, Baltic residents felt that momentum toward independence was accelerating. But from the Soviet point of view ... Gorbachev at this time apparently still believed that the Baltic States could be a sort of laboratory for testing ideas to rejuvenate the Soviet Union. I think that's how he thought of them, as a valuable part of the USSR. Because of their past history and ties with the West, because of their small size, because of their reputation for a high degree of education and industrial productivity, they could be used as a test bed to experiment with techniques that might then be expanded on a broader scale to rejuvenate the entire Soviet Union. He entirely missed, misunderstood, failed to grasp, the strength of national feeling in the Baltic States. Maybe even today he's still puzzled about why the Balts show so little gratitude for what the Soviets tried to do for them. That point of view is shared by a lot of Russians who, to this day, regard the Balts as ungrateful pests who during the Soviet era enjoyed a standard of living higher than the average for the USSR. Many Russians apparently are convinced that the Balts benefited from their relationship with the Soviet Union. They cannot imagine that from the Baltic perspective their half century inside the USSR was a long, painful period when economic, political and social development was smothered by the Russian occupation. Many Balts feel confident that if they had remained independent, their economies would have kept pace with, say, those of Denmark or Finland or Sweden. Instead, upon finally regaining their independence, they found themselves far poorer than any EU members.

Q: Well then, then moving on, when did you leave Strasbourg and what did you do?

SILINS: In the fall of '91, Bob Frasure, Darryl Johnson and I assembled in Copenhagen at the request of the State Department to begin laying plans for the establishment of diplomatic missions in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The United States had formally recognized them as independent countries at the beginning of September 1991. Our mission was going to be to open up embassies in Tallinn, Vilnius and Riga. Bob went to Tallinn, Darryl to Vilnius and I went to

Riga. We went first on a TDY (temporary duty) basis, and then were designated as *chargés* in early October.

Our first job was to find locations for these new embassies.... Well, that's not quite accurate. Our principal goal was to establish a diplomatic beachhead and begin to help these fragile new governments cope with the scary set of economic, political and security problems that faced them. But simply putting together the rudiments of a diplomatic mission absorbed much of our energy in the first weeks. In Riga, I led a small group of officers, sent on a TDY basis from the State Department, operating out of the fifth floor of a small downtown hotel, the *Ridzene*. Our communication with Washington was by the Inmarsat system, with a satellite dish set up on a window ledge. I slept in a room down the hall. So the U.S. embassy was at first a hotel room, and pretty much the same thing happened in the other two Baltic capitals.

Q: What had happened at this point when you were there? I mean, what was the situation?

SILINS: We reached this point only after the U.S. Government recognized Baltic independence and opened diplomatic relations with Baltic countries. We were far from the first to do so; Iceland was the first. We were way down the line, I forget the exact number, something like 27th, 30th or something. The reason for that was the policy of President Bush, that is, the elder George Bush, his policy of prudence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. I think I've mentioned this in a previous context. He did not wish to move so rapidly into this very sensitive part of the former Soviet Union as to provoke a Soviet counter-reaction. He wanted to move slowly and carefully so as not to jeopardize Baltic independence or Soviet stability. That's why we didn't rush in to be the first to recognize. Our slow pace was held against us, and maybe to this day still is, by some Baltic citizens, but I think it was a wise and certainly a defensible policy.

Q: Well, this is to avoid what they call triumphalism.

SILINS: Right.

Q: You're right. But anyway ...

SILINS: Right. No, that's quite true. We knew that, as I said, we were responsible for holding open the possibility of independence for the Baltic States over all these decades. So, no reason to shout about it. We just wanted to go in there and get the job done... and there was, of course, a lot to get done.

Q: Okay, you were given Latvia, is that...?

SILINS: Right.

Q: Was this a joint effort where the three teams were doing it all together, or did you each go to a place and do your work?

SILINS: We met initially to coordinate the basic policy and organize the practical work, decide how we would communicate with the State Department, whom we would report to. Our first job

was simply the physical task, the administrative task of setting up these facilities, of establishing a place to work, assigning responsibilities and getting this job done. We operated separately from each other but we met periodically, typically in a Nordic capital and then on a rotational basis in Riga, Tallinn and Vilnius once our embassies were functioning. The idea was to share experiences, share ideas – what worked, what didn't work – because we were basically all operating to the same, dare I say, cookie cutter mold as far as actually setting up the embassy went. And here you probably sense a beef coming.

At this time James Baker was secretary of state and he had apparently decided that he was going to open all these new embassies – and I'm talking about not just the three Baltic States but also the many former Soviet republics that quickly peeled off from Mother Russia – without any new money.

Q: That's one of those horrible mistakes. I mean, it sounded like sort of a political gimmick with no real value at all outside of ...

SILINS: Well, it caused a lot of stress. I think it was silly and irresponsible. We could have redistributed funds from some other government agencies that had an excess, for example the Department of Defense. After all, the Cold War was now more or less over and you might think there would be a peace dividend, but for some reason Baker essentially said, well, we'll just open... whatever it came to, something over a dozen new embassies... without any new funding. And it caused staffing shortages. For example, Embassy Riga never had a general services officer during my time as ambassador, which in retrospect I find hilarious. To actually, you know, to start off in a hotel and be looking for a building and then reconfigure a building into an embassy, starting absolutely from scratch and having to select, hire and train local staff without a GSO was just ludicrous. I also didn't have a permanent administrative officer much of the time, so I was dependent on temporary officers, TDYers, which of course caused problems of continuity. So I had to devote more time than I could spare to overseeing the administrative activities of getting an embassy located, renovated, staffed up.

Q: What was the situation on the ground where you were working?

SILINS: The situation in late 1990 and early 1991 had been turbulent and threatening. When we arrived in September 1991 there were still barricades in downtown Riga left over from that period, when there had been a sort of abortive coup attempt. Lots of Russians were appalled at the idea of Russia losing the Baltic States. Within the USSR itself there was a conservative backlash against the direction Gorbachev was taking, and in late 1990 there were rumors there might be a coup in Russia followed by a dictatorship. In fact, Soviet Foreign Minister Shevardnadze resigned in December 1990, warning that "dictatorship is coming." A right-wing coup in Moscow would almost certainly have led sooner or later to an attempt to seize back Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. The skeleton of an alternative Soviet-loyalist government – a "Committee of National Salvation" – had been formed in Latvia, and in January of '91 Soviet special forces, the OMON, were briefly unleashed. There was some gunfire in downtown Riga. One of their targets was the Latvian interior ministry building, which is across a narrow street from the Hotel Ridzene, which became the U.S. Embassy. Some people were shot in the park across the street. There was also shooting inside the hotel itself. Jim Kenney, who later became

my Public Affairs Officer, happened to be in the building at the time, on a visit from Embassy Moscow. There were still, when I was living there, bullet holes in the glass that lined the staircase leading up to the second floor from the lobby.

So the situation was volatile. Many Russians were clearly reluctant to relinquish the Baltic States. They considered them to be a signature acquisition of Peter the Great. They considered that the territory had been bought with Russian blood, that this relationship went back hundreds of years. There is also in Russia a certain lack of appreciation and respect for small nations. Many Russians are disinclined to take them seriously. Some Russians even felt that way about the Swedes, I found. I remember when I told one of my Russian friends in Leningrad that my next diplomatic assignment was going to be in Sweden, he looked baffled and said, "Why would you want to go to such a small country?" And he was an anti-authoritarian painter.

Then, too, Latvia had become sort of a Palm Beach for retired KGB, Soviet military and people with reactionary views about Russia and Russian history and what Russia ought to be doing in that region. And so, with the continuing presence of tens of thousands of disgruntled and unpaid Soviet troops and the horrific economic collapse that followed Latvia's separation from the Soviet Union... yes, the situation was still volatile.

Q: Well, was there the feeling that this thing might not hold?

SILINS: Yes, there was that feeling. For part of the time I kept a journal, a sort of personal diary that reflects some of my thoughts and feelings at the time. I didn't start it until early '93, as I recall, and even at that late date my very first entry, I remember, reflects a feeling that, oh my God, here comes another round of really strong Russian pressure. Russia was launching attacks on the Baltic States at the United Nations and dragging its feet on troop withdrawals and I remember thinking, you know, this still is not a sure thing, this is not a done deal, there's a long way to go, we need to have a strong U.S. presence here to keep it moving forward.

We also had to work on the Latvian side to make sure that those many Latvians who felt a sense of national outrage at what had been done to them by Russia, that they not overreact. Many of them, for example, didn't want to reach a signed agreement on the withdrawal of Soviet forces. They felt that it would imply recognition and even legal acceptance of the Soviet annexation, and we had to talk them out of that. We felt that it was very important for future stability that there be a clear, signed agreement that provided for the staged withdrawal of Soviet forces and the removal of the strategic anti-missile radar site – a "Hen House" radar – based at Skrunda in Latvia.

So it was still a very touchy time. And then, of course, the economy went wholly, completely to pot with an inflation rate that reached 1,000 percent in 1992.

Q: Well, whom did you deal with when you got there? Was there a government in place?

SILINS: There was a government. What the Latvians and Estonians and Lithuanians did initially was to adapt the elected structures from the Soviet period, the Supreme Soviets, and turn them into representatives of independent governments until sovereign constitutions and parliaments

could be set up. So at first we were dealing with people who had been elected under the Soviet era but who had shown a clear intent to make their country independent.

Q: I would think these people would be so tainted that the general population wouldn't accept them.

SILINS: Actually, that turned out not to be the case. And it proved possible to have an orderly transition. In Latvia it worked out better than in some countries with which I am familiar -- Romania, for example. In Romania the old gang clung to power even after they shot Ceausescu and his wife, so the Romanian public, rightly, remained suspicious of them and their goals for a long time. In Latvia it was less the case. There were still groups in Latvia, of course, that showed reluctance to support Latvian independence, mostly ethnic Russians who wanted to retain a strong link to Moscow. Those, of course, roused some apprehensions, but it probably helped that they were represented in the parliament because at least they weren't driven underground.

Perhaps most important, though, is one key pragmatic consideration: things were going to pot in Russia even faster than in Latvia. In other words, many Russians in Latvia could see that they were better off in Latvia than in Russia, certainly for the short term, and that Latvia was likely to get a lot more help economically, relatively speaking, from the major West European countries and the United States. I think that knowledge kept even nationalist Russians in Latvia from soiling their own nests, so to speak. I mean, they didn't want to leave Latvia for Russia because they would be worse off there, and they didn't want to cause too much of a fuss in Latvia because that would just jeopardize their own situation, both political and economic. After all, if they consolidated their position in Latvia, they would eventually be in a position to benefit from Latvia's growing links to the West. The net result was a fairly orderly evolution toward a solid majority of people who wanted Latvia and the other Baltic States to remain independent.

Q: You were wearing two hats. One is just the plain administrative hat, which would be enough to overwhelm anyone of trying to set up an embassy. But the other hat was... you're the American representative there, and how were you playing this? I mean, what were you trying to do?

SILINS: Let's focus first on the fact that I myself was born in Latvia but now here I was, representing the U.S. That was a delicate issue, and I dealt with it as best I could. I'm not sure, in retrospect, if I did that as well as I might have. I probably overdid the "I am now American" side of things.

Q: Well, this often... you have to draw the line.

SILINS: Yes.

Q: You're not one of us, I mean, you...

SILINS: Right. I did that not just to avoid confusing people about whom I was representing but because one of my first messages, and it was not always welcome, to the new representatives of the Latvian government was: people, don't count on the West to solve all your problems. You

are going to have to solve your basic problems yourself. Don't just wait for aid; organize, figure out your own solutions to your problems because that really is the only way it's going to work. And one of the reasons why I stressed this message was my experience in Haiti. Now, this may sound like a strange connection, but it was in Haiti that I conceived a really profound skepticism about the efficacy of foreign assistance to countries.

Of course Haiti has its own particular problems. I also remember, of course, that the Marshall Plan seemed to work pretty darned well in Europe – but Latvia wasn't like postwar France or Germany. Latvia had a different set of problems to solve that we in the West couldn't necessarily provide the best answers to. And waiting for help from others can breed passivity. So I stressed self-help.

I also perhaps didn't work as hard as I should have in reviving my own ability to communicate in Latvian. I was able to speak fair Latvian, but normally in my official meetings I spoke English. I wanted to convince Latvian officials that they better learn English fast. I think that was the correct message, and the fact that many of them did learn English quickly was a great plus. It made it a lot easier for them to deal with the West.

Q: Well, did you speak “teenage Latvian” anyway or not?

SILINS: I spoke pretty good kitchen Latvian. I'm generally fairly gifted at languages up to a point. Latvian was my first language so pronunciation was not a problem. But Latvian is a highly inflected language with a complex grammar, and I had quite consciously switched to English when I was very young. To this day I don't feel comfortable addressing a difficult subject off the cuff in Latvian.

Q: Were you, and maybe your European counterparts, were you also telling the Latvian Latvians: don't go after the Russians here on your soil; you've got to learn to live together?

SILINS: Yes, we were preaching a lot about this. As I mentioned, lots of Latvians felt deeply aggrieved by the Russians, who had annexed their country, killed or driven out huge numbers of their countrymen, hijacked their economy, cut them off from the West, and of course imposed the Russian language on them. As I recall from my own calculations, Latvia experienced something like a net gain of 800,000 ethnic Russians, or Russian speakers, after Latvia was annexed by the Soviet Union. For a small country of two-and-half million people, that's an immense number, about a third of the population. That would be like the United States having involuntarily to absorb 80 million Mexicans over a period of several decades – if Mexico were a country with a population of over two billion that had occupied and annexed the U.S.

Latvians were almost reduced to a minority population by the time they regained independence. So there was a vocal minority of Latvians calling for mass repatriation of Russians. The U.S. Government, and other Western governments, didn't see any workable way of repatriating hundreds of thousands or even tens of thousands of Russians, particularly to a Russia that was, like Latvia, in economic chaos. So that idea had to be shelved, and we were successful in doing that. From the other side, to this day you hear from Moscow accusations that Latvia does not

give a fair shake to its Russian residents. But the CSCE has investigated those claims year in, year out, and has not found them persuasive.

Q: Were there any particular types of Soviet troops there that caused a problem?

SILINS: The only serious violence that took place was the shootings that I mentioned in January of '91 by the OMON, the Special Forces-type guys. But that was a brief skirmish, thank God, and ...

Q: That was over a radio tower, wasn't it?

SILINS: I think the famous tower you may have in mind was in Vilnius, actually, in Lithuania. In Latvia the OMON holed up in what became the interior ministry building, opposite what became the American embassy in downtown Riga.

In Latvia, aside from the public anxiety provoked by the presence of tens of thousands of underpaid and poorly disciplined Soviet troops, a serious problem was... well, let's call it vandalism. It was vandalism directed mostly, in fact almost entirely, at facilities that the Soviet troops occupied or used, military facilities. When they left them, as they did over time, they really stripped them. They took out the wiring, the windows, doorknobs, plumbing fixtures... anything you could think of to sell or re-use. Sometimes there was simply malicious vandalism. I need not dwell, I think, on the details, but a historic building near the university in downtown Riga that had been used as an officers club was left in a very messy condition. The Soviet Navy, which was present in force in the city of Liepāja, started stripping their ships of brass fittings and so forth, actually causing many of them to sink at their berths, a pathetic sight.

Another kind of mess was from fuel. There was a lot of fuel leakage around their fuel dumps. Apparently they took the word "fuel dump" literally. I remember as ambassador going to a place near a former Soviet airfield where an American company was trying to clean up the soil. They had drilled a pipe into the ground and showed me that what they were pumping up was basically pure jet fuel, which had been allowed to leak from a pipe that connected the storage tanks with refueling pumps at the airfield. And I should mention, of course, the explosives. There were target ranges with unexploded munitions and ammo dumps and other things that had to be cleaned up. So it was a big, expensive mess whose extent, I confess, shocked me.

Q: We're talking now on the beautiful campus of the Foreign Service Institute but this had been a military base for 50 years. It was not a major facility but the fact that they had a motor pool here meant there were leaks. And so they had to, you know, pull all the soil up around here and aerate it or something before they could put it back in. If we're bad I can imagine the Soviets would be much worse.

SILINS: Yes. I think they took it to new heights or depths.

Q: What was your impression of the Latvians that you were dealing with at the time? Were they hard-headed pragmatists or idealists; I mean, what were you getting from them?

SILINS: There was quite a spectrum across the leadership group. One of the most effective leaders, because he was calm and reassuring during a tense period, was a person who falls under the category we were just discussing, of former Soviet officials. Anatolijs Gorbunovs had held a very high position in the Latvian communist party, and so you might think that he was a poor choice to be the acting head of the new transition government, but that wasn't true. He was able to deal well with Russians; they knew him, he knew them. He was able to deal well with Latvians; although his name may sound Russian he was considered to be 100 percent Latvian. He was able to deal quite well with Westerners, too, although I don't think his English skills ever developed to a high point. But he was an excellent choice to smooth over that transition period.

When a fresh government was elected, the first prime minister was a former physicist, Ivars Godmanis, who in fact until just recently was again prime minister of Latvia. He resigned [20 February 2009] when the government collapsed over the new round of economic difficulties there. He made a good first Latvian prime minister for reasons sort of opposite to those that made Gorbunovs an appropriate leader for his time. Godmanis was untainted by any previous association with the communist party, at least in any official capacity. As a scientist he was more or less insulated from that. He was very smart, as physicists often are. He had strong analytical skills; he could size up a problem and figure out how to attack it. He had been active in the independence movement so he had credibility with the more nationalist groups among Latvians. I believe he was very effective in getting Latvia through an extremely difficult time, but he took the rap for it. As is often the case, even if someone succeeds in getting you through a hard time, what you remember is the hard time and not the getting through. Poor Godmanis, when the next round of elections came, his party didn't even get into the parliament, so in effect he was dumped for his pains.

Q: How did things work for you? You say you weren't a chargé at first, you were just kind of there, and then what happened?

SILINS: The process was this. All three of us who were going to be nominated as ambassadors were first sent out TDY [on temporary duty]. This is very unusual; normally you have confirmation hearings with the Senate Foreign Relations committee and *agrément* is requested from the government to which you will be accredited. In this case, in order to accelerate the process, we were sent out, first of all, to set up the missions, then we were nominated by the State Department. After going through the usual clearance process, we were all, I think, confirmed by the Senate at about the same time. In my case that was in late March of '92. After my confirmation hearing, I flew back to Strasbourg to join my wife Elizabeth. We loaded up our station wagon with essential items, including our yellow Labrador Brio, and in April drove from Strasbourg to Riga by way of stops in Prague and Warsaw. That was the basic drill: first on TDY to open up the missions, then back to Washington, get nominated, go through the Senate confirmation process and some training, and then out in the spring of '92 as designated ambassadors.

Q: I would think that you would find yourself with members of the Latvian exile community who had been in the United States maybe for their whole lives breathing down your neck, who had political clout, who wanted to get in there and start doing things.

SILINS: You mean who would like to be ambassador?

Q: Either ambassador or just sort of come in and sort of take over.

SILINS: Well no, I didn't really find that. Although some American Latvians were a bit frustrated at what they perceived as the slow pace of the Bush Administration in setting up embassies, recognizing the Baltic States, and so forth, I think in general they were quite satisfied with what the U.S. Government was doing. The fact that I was an ethnic Latvian and a career diplomat with highly relevant experience made it hard for any members of the U.S. Latvian community to say, well, wait a minute, we want a real Latvian in there. I'm not aware of anyone who was jockeying for my position. We did have quite a number of ethnic Latvians who in fact went out there, some of them before I did, certainly before I arrived as ambassador, who wanted to help, to do something on all kinds of fronts, either to help form a new government or some of the early entrepreneurs to get in on the ground floor and start building up business in Latvia. So yes, there was a wave of returnees to the Baltic States, in particular to Lithuania, which is the largest country and which had the largest pool of residents in the U.S. to draw from.

Q: How did you find working there as ambassador? I mean, were you part of, you might say, a Western team of ambassadors?

SILINS: Definitely, yes. There was a tightly knit and closely communicating team of Western ambassadors. We generally met at the residence or embassy of whoever was the dean of the corps, that is, the longest serving member. To start off, it was the German ambassador, Hagen Graf Lambsdorff, whose family has a long Baltic/Russian connection. Toward the end of my tour I became the informal head. All the NATO- and EC-member ambassadors were part of the team. We consulted with each other all the time because we felt that we faced common problems, common issues. Even before the embassies as such were open there was close consultation with other Western governments and in particular the Nordic countries. Sweden played a lead role vis-à-vis Latvia.

I may have mentioned that I brought a group of Latvian parliamentarians to Washington for consultations in, I believe, early '94 because some political parties were still stubbornly resisting the idea of signing an agreement with the Soviet Union about troop withdrawal. I escorted the delegation, which represented all the political parties in the Latvian parliament, to reassuring conversations with top U.S. government officials, including President Clinton and Vice President Gore. We then took them to the residence of the Swedish ambassador in Washington for more talks with their European counterparts. I believe that to an important extent it was the Swedes who helped persuade them that holding out was not a wise position, that an agreement with Russia was the best way to go.

Q: What about dealing with... I guess when you first arrived it was still the Soviet ambassador, wasn't it?

SILINS: The Soviet Union folded at the end of 1991, so for almost all of my time as ambassador there was also a Russian ambassador, that is, a representative of the Russian Federation, Aleksandr Rannikh. I found it easy to have a good relationship with him because he didn't have

the mentality of a typical Soviet career official. If I remember correctly, he had risen through the ranks, having started off as an interpreter and spent a lot of time in Finland. I didn't deal with him much on substance. Key Latvian-Russian issues, and the key one was really Russian troop withdrawals, he and I did not address bilaterally. Those were handled at the highest level in Washington and Moscow, ultimately at the presidential level.

Rannikh and I talked sometimes in an informal way about relations in Latvia between Russians and Latvians. I took it upon myself to try to change his thinking about how to look at the history of Latvia and Latvia's relationship with Russia. I thought perhaps he might suffer from the same warped perspective that a lot of Russians do, because that's what their history textbooks teach them – that the Baltic States had joined the USSR voluntarily and benefited from the relationship. I found, to my pleasure, that possibly because of the time he spent in Finland he knew where I was coming from, understood the history better than lots of people in his own foreign ministry, but really wasn't, he said, in a position to do much about it. There are some anecdotes about this in a short journal that I kept sporadically while in Riga, parts of which have been published in various formats. One version of it is in a book published in English by the University of Latvia in 2008, Latvia and the USA: From Captive Nation to Strategic Partner.

Q: Well, how were relations between the Baltic countries? I mean, I assume they all had their own grievances.

SILINS: That's a very good question. I think there was an expectation in Washington that, well, these countries have suffered similar fates and so they'll want to work closely together in molding their futures. Of course, it doesn't always work out that way. They were a bit like hostages who after they're released do not necessarily want to spend all their time together. They want to go off in their own directions.

Q: And we always lump them together.

SILINS: We do, we do. Because it's hard, really, to keep track; for a non-specialist it's hard even to remember which is which. And so yes, there was this automatic pressure to treat them as more or less identical, which they of course resented. And of course it's also true that they're in some sense natural competitors, you know. In some ways they are good at the same things and therefore compete at those things.

Ultimately I think it worked out pretty well because they're also pretty realistic, these countries, and they realized that they do have to work together. Probably the strongest force keeping them, shall we say, in line, was their desire for membership in two organizations, the European Union and NATO. The reminder that they should not be too unruly or seen to be uncooperative was most effective when it was in the context of a path toward membership in the EU or NATO, and that proved to be effective.

Q: Where did Kaliningrad fit into this? Because that's an old Soviet name... I think of it as Königsberg.

SILINS: It was.

Q: And where did that fit in?

SILINS: Well, Kaliningrad is an as yet undigested remnant of the old Soviet empire. I find it hard to imagine that it will persist indefinitely in its detached state. You're right; it was called Königsberg. That's where Immanuel Kant, the most famous philosopher, lived a very orderly life. It became essentially a Soviet military base after World War II. The remnants of its past were largely annihilated but Moscow wanted, indeed insisted on holding on to it as an integral part of the Russian Federation, and so one of the more complicated aspects of dealing with the newly independent status of the Baltic States was working out access for Russia to Kaliningrad; resupply and visa questions and transit issues and so forth. It's enveloped by Lithuania and there's no direct contact with Latvia, so we watched it from a distance.

Q: Was there a sense, in Latvia, that the people you were dealing with were taking a very close look at what was happening in Russia at the time? I mean, you know, ready for a resurgence or what have you?

SILINS: Absolutely, yes. Latvians were very, very keenly attuned to what was going on in Russia, as were the Russians in Latvia, of whom there were, you know, hundreds of thousands. Of course, early in the Soviet era, before the U.S. entered into diplomatic relations with Moscow after the Bolshevik Revolution, for us Latvia was of interest primarily as an observation post, a window looking into Russia. That's why George Kennan went to Riga, not to pay much attention to Latvia but to see what he could learn about what was going on in communist Russia. To this day, everyone who has anything to do with Latvia realizes that if the situation evolves in an unfavorable direction in Russia, it's likely to impact very negatively very quickly on Latvia. So they're interested not just in political developments but in economic ones. One of the hopes for prosperity in Latvia was as a transit country for Russia. That is, goods would be shipped from Russia to the West through Latvia and from the West to Russia through Latvia. That's how it used to make a lot of its money back in the Middle Ages. Bad relations with Russia would immediately be reflected by slow transit times across the Latvian-Russian border, and that unfortunately is true to this day. That border remains an unpredictable and difficult place to get across.

Q: Was oil or natural gas an issue while you were there?

SILINS: Both are to this day. Oil was pumped by Russia across Latvia to the port of Ventspils and then shipped from there to the West. That pipeline became, first of all, a source of a lot of money in Latvia because Latvia would collect transshipment fees. It then turned into a point of tension, because the Russians felt the fees being charged were too high. The Russians also wanted to develop a purely nationally controlled exit point for oil and petroleum products closer to St. Petersburg, so they eventually cut the Latvian pipeline off. For years the oil pipeline across Latvia, to my understanding, has not been used, although some oil continues to flow from Russia to Ventspils in freight cars, which is much more expensive and cumbersome.

As for natural gas, it is Latvia's main source of heating fuel in the winter, and Latvia is entirely dependent on Russia for it. Latvia is blessed with huge underground storage facilities, natural caverns that can be used to store natural gas. So it had a buffer of sorts, luckily, because Russia several times stopped the flow of natural gas to Latvia, over disputes about the price or to make a political point.

Q: How about Poland? Was Poland a factor?

SILINS: Poland was, I think, a big factor vis-à-vis Lithuania, with both positive and negative overtones because of the tangled history of the two countries. If my memory is correct, what is now Lithuania's capital, Vilnius, was *not* part of Lithuania during Lithuania's first modern appearance as an independent state; it lay in territory annexed by Poland in the 1920's, much to Lithuania's outrage. So Lithuania actually gained a sizeable stretch of territory when it was occupied by the USSR, because Moscow reattached the missing bit, which was retained when Lithuania became independent again. On the other hand, farther back is a more positive and equally intimate historical link between Lithuania and Poland. They were, in effect, joint managers of a serious empire, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth or Union, which for about two centuries stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Memories of that period of grandeur form an important part of Lithuania's cultural and psychological heritage. So I suspect Poland looms large on the Lithuanian mental horizon, but I can't say that Poland was a strong player in Latvia.

Q: How about Finland, Sweden?

SILINS: Yes. Both were very important, particularly, as I mentioned, Sweden. Sweden was first on the ground with a diplomatic post in Latvia, in Riga, headed by a very talented young man named Lars Fredén, who knew everybody and everything and was a great help to the other newcomer ambassadors reporting in from Western countries. I had an advantage in that I'd been there before, spoke the language and so forth, but I still always found him valuable to talk to.

Sweden also became effective as an advisor to the new Latvian government on questions like, how does a parliamentary system work, that sort of thing, and also in terms of economic aid and in encouraging Swedish businessmen set up shop in Latvia.

Q: Did Finland play any role at all?

SILINS: Finland played a very, very active role in Estonia, even more active there proportionately than Sweden was in Latvia, and that's because really the Estonians and the Finns are close cousins, virtually brothers. The languages are very similar. They actually can understand each other, which is not true, for example, of Latvians and Lithuanians. The languages are related but I really can't just sit down and have a conversation with a Lithuanian, whereas Estonians were able to watch Finnish television, even during the Soviet era. Because they're very, very close, Finns used to come either by boat or by train to Estonia, driven in part by the desire for cheap vodka, but that turned into a very serious business connection when Estonia became independent. Now Finland plays a leading role in Estonia, to the extent that some Estonians proclaim their country a Nordic rather than a Baltic one.

Q: I had a little taste of the American non-governmental organization relationship with the Stans. I went out for three weeks to Kyrgyzstan to talk to the government on a USIA grant about setting up a consular service. And I was astounded at the NGO people. I mean, some very good and some, I would say, dubious and then also the missionary movement. But there was a tremendous flow to the East from the United States of various organizations giving economic advice, converting to Christianity, anything you could think about. How did you find dealing with this and how did it work for you?

SILINS: There was quite a lot of that in Latvia. In general I would say that the most active NGOs tended to be Latvian-American or Latvian-Australian or what have you, organizations that in general played a very positive role. Some of their members came over and worked not just as representatives of that organization but joined the government, went into business or became an integral part of Latvian society. Latvia, like the other two Baltic countries, made it possible for the offspring of former Latvian citizens to reclaim their citizenship. You didn't necessarily have to be born in Latvia to come back and get your passport. If, for example, your parents were born in Latvia and they had left the country because the Soviets occupied it after the Second World War, you could get your passport. Quite a number of people did that, and once they did that they could integrate into the local scene. Further helping the process along was the Latvian government's decision to restore property rights to the descendants of citizens whose lands and buildings had been nationalized by the Soviets.

There were also non-ethnic Westerners of all different types and some of them were helpful and some were not. When the situation stabilized and people in the West could see that Latvia was going to make it as an independent country, we began to have quite a lot of evangelicals coming and, in my opinion, not always playing a terribly positive role. They were responding to what they thought of as a suppressed demand for religion, and it was true that that was the case. I mean, the Soviets had very strongly discouraged religion but the varieties being offered by some of these proselytizers were not always, I think, the best. Sometimes they preyed on weakness rather than providing a source of strength.

Q: What about the church there? Was there a Latvian Orthodox Church?

SILINS: Latvia had a broad representation of religious groups. It was the most cosmopolitan of all of the Baltic capitals for hundreds of years and had churches of many denominations for centuries. So what you had represented there were Jews, Russian Orthodox, you had Lutherans, Catholics; pretty much anything you wanted, suppressed of course during the Soviet era but with the remnants still there. I think of Latvians as predominantly Lutheran, but Catholics are also very numerous and of course there is a strong contingent of Russian Orthodox.

At the same time Latvians are, let's say, more like Swedes with respect to religion than the Lithuanians. Lithuania had an ardent Catholic tradition that persisted during the Soviet era, and the underground church, or even the acknowledged, the official church played an active role in, let's call them Lithuanian national issues; that is, they kept alive the notion of Lithuania as a potentially independent entity. As the Catholic Church in Poland, for example, was very active in the underground nationalist movement all through the Soviet era. Latvians are a little bit more,

shall we say, standoffish vis-à-vis religion, with of course lots and lots of exceptions, but they tend more toward the secular than their Lithuanian neighbors. That's also true, I think, of Estonians. But that's not to say that the churches did not play an important role; they certainly did, and they continue to do that to this day. And churches of course were among the first organizations to establish links with the West as quickly as they could.

Q: What about NATO? You were there from when to when?

SILINS: From the fall of '91 until the summer of '95, so a pretty broad span.

Q: So this was a long period. Was it sort of understood from the beginning that these countries would be absorbed into NATO or not?

SILINS: No, not at all. It wasn't a sure thing, and I think many Russians to this day are aghast that the Baltic States were absorbed into NATO. In fact, Gorbachev may even believe that he was given the promise that they would not be. No, it was contentious right from the start for obvious reasons. This is territory that the Russians considered an integral part of their nation and suddenly it's going to be absorbed into a military organization whose founding purpose was to oppose Russia by military force! So yes, it was a contentious issue because at the time the remnants of Soviet forces are still inside these states. So there was a lot of debate about it, not just between the West and Russia but within U.S. policy circles, the public. People argued that it would be provocative to Russia, that there was no need for it; that after all, since the Cold War was over, why on earth would we want to not only perpetuate but actually expand an organization whose *raison d'être* seemed to be behind it? So there was a lot of debate about that.

Q: How did you feel about this and how did this play sort of internally with you?

SILINS: I have to say on this issue that I can't claim to have been an important player because I always had very mixed feelings about it. I cannot claim, do not claim to have been an ardent advocate of Baltic NATO membership; at the same time, if you asked, on balance, which side was I more for, it would be NATO membership, no question about that. The main justification really was this, in my mind: you couldn't leave them out. If we left them out they would become a kind of a gray area, a zone of instability, basically. That was the bottom line. In fact, I could see no way around that argument. As long as NATO exists and as long as NATO operates on the principle that any European country willing to accept its rules and voluntarily asking to join it would be admitted, then I don't see how you could keep them out. Because if we told them no, then what we're saying, no matter what we want to say or think we're saying, what we are saying to the Russians is, you guys have a say about what happens in the zone; it's basically your backyard, and you can have a perhaps even controlling influence on what happens here. And I did not think we should be doing that.

Q: When you arrived, did the Latvians talk NATO right from the beginning?

SILINS: Not exactly. In the very early days, the main military issue was not "NATO in" but "Warsaw Pact out." That was the focus, how to get the remnants of the Soviet military structure out of the Baltic States. Most Latvians, as I recall at the time, had the good sense not to be too

vociferous in public about seeking NATO membership while this issue remained unresolved. But there was little doubt about where their sentiments lay, and most of the active political leaders made it clear early in the game that their two major goals were NATO membership and membership of the European Union. That's how they thought they would ensure the security and prosperity of their country.

Q: Was there a Latvian military?

SILINS: That's a good question. There was not really a Latvian military, no. That was one of the big problems and it took a lot of our time and attention to solve it.

Latvians, of course, had served in the Soviet military, but the officers produced by that experience, most of us felt, were not the best guides to setting up a new independent Latvian military. The Soviet military system is notorious for its defects, in particular the way it treats its recruits. Hazing was vicious and apparently still persists in the Russian military. They lacked an effective NCO (non-commissioned officer) system, which is the heart of the American military. I mean, the NCOs – the smart, tough, experienced career soldiers – are really what make our army the best in the world. The Soviets didn't have anything comparable to that; it was a very top-down approach, plus, of course, all the political indoctrination that goes with Soviet military training. There were a few veterans of that Soviet experience that surfaced as potential organizers of a new independent Latvian military, but we didn't think that that would work out too well.

What we did was to turn to our National Guard structure as a starting point because we thought the first priority was not some sort of, you know, special forces type operation for Latvia but a National Guard type of structure that would be the most relevant to Baltic security needs. And to do that, and I think this was a good choice, we forged links between state National Guard units in the United States and the Baltic States. In the case of Latvia, Michigan was the state that came to mind. It happens there are a number of Latvians in Michigan, and the Michigan National Guard really rose to the occasion. They began in a very low key way in helping the Latvians with the basics. We also were able to get some former U.S. military officers to come as advisors. One of them, a Latvian-American, actually became a minister of defense in Latvia. And so that was the route we took to rebuilding the military.

Q: I can see the National Guard makes good sense because in a way, at least to start off, the National Guard has a role of protecting internal order, disaster relief, this type of thing, which is what you would want; a small country, it's not going to be there to stand off the Russian army. It's mainly an internal guard.

SILINS: Right. But it was not easy to attract young Latvians into the military. There was a lingering antipathy toward military service because of the bitter Soviet experience. You know, lots of Latvians were sent off to Afghanistan by the Soviets. And of course the pay was terrible and the facilities had just been vandalized by the Russians, so it was tough sledding to start with.

I have to praise the Latvian leadership for seeing right from the start, though, that they had to aim beyond just the National Guard approach. They had taken on board very early the lesson that if

you're want to join NATO you have to be, in the rather inelegant phrase, not just a consumer of security but also a producer of security. Meaning that you can't just say okay, I'm in, now protect me, but you also have to offer some services, some contribution of your own. The Baltic States understood this right from the start, and so small though they were, that's why they signed on, this of course much later, when the U.S. went into Afghanistan and to a lesser extent they helped with Iraq. In the earlier era, before Afghanistan and Iraq, they were preparing their soldiers to act as observers in troubled areas, wherever they might be, in Africa or the Middle East, what have you.

Q: And Bosnia?

SILINS: Yes, that sort of thing. And I think that was very wise, they realized that they needed that kind of training and that kind of experience, so they could say, when someone asked them, well why should we help you out? Well, because we can do this, this and this and we have done so.

Q: Yes. Did you get involved in the early development of that?

SILINS: Well sure, as ambassador at a small embassy I was involved to some extent with everything. I worked with the National Guard and kept their morale up and made sure that link was working well. I visited their training sites, talked to the Latvian military establishment to make sure they understood the importance of what was going on and that they appreciated it in the long run.

Q: I would think there would be a tremendous problem of trying to change a military to, you know, to reflect the NATO way of doing things rather than the Soviet system of officers dumping on the enlisted men. I would think it would be very wrenching to change that. I mean, how does this work?

SILINS: Well, you do it step by step and you do it by taking people to the U.S. for training, for example, so that you get them totally out of the Soviet environment and show them in person how it works in the West, put them into the context. So we sent quite a lot of people at various levels, from West Point on down, for training in the U.S., both long term and short term, and brought in sizeable numbers of National Guard people to convey in a more dramatic sense how the mentality actually operates.

One of the things that we used the National Guard for was not just military training but really as exemplars, as role models. They would do volunteer projects. You know, there was so much that needed to be done all through Latvia that there was no lack of possibilities. For example, if there were a school near where they were based, on weekends they would form a team and go fix things up or paint up a classroom, stuff like that, to get the concept of volunteerism going, which was not widely accepted in Latvia except in the sense of something that's directed from above and, you know, you have to do it because the party tells you to.

Q: Well, did you have to work to develop a real party system or did the Latvian system fall into parties almost naturally?

SILINS: You're talking about political structure?

Q: Right. You know, conservative, liberal or whatever you want to call it.

SILINS: Like most countries, Latvia does not tend toward a tidy two-party system. The U.S. is rather unusual in this respect. When Latvia was independent between the two World Wars, it developed an excess of political parties. I think at one point it had something like 40 political parties, which is, to say the least, too many for a small country. It has a tendency toward political fragmentation.

Initially, though, in 1991 and 1992, perhaps the main factor was the unpleasant memory of the rigid and oppressive Communist Party, which gave the whole notion of political party membership a bad name and made people reluctant to throw themselves into political organizational work. The first Latvian governments were formed by groupings that were not really political parties, more like national task forces. The first was the broadly based Popular Front, whose main unifying goal was the restoration of Latvia's independence. That goal was achieved, but when Latvia's economy crashed after being cut off from the Soviet infrastructure in which it had been embedded, the Popular Front crashed with it. It did not win a single seat in the Latvian parliament, the Saeima, in the 1993 election. This despite having won about 75% of the vote in the 1990 election!

Next at bat was a coalition called "Latvia's Way." It was also called "The Best of the East and the West" because it comprised, on the one hand, people who had grown up under the Soviet system in Latvia, and on the other hand, Latvians who had spent much of their lives in the West and who brought to the table an entirely different experience. But by now there were more than 20 registered political parties in Latvia. "Latvia's Way" only won about a third of the votes and had to join with the Farmers Union to form a government. So a pattern was set whereby there would be broad, fairly reliable support for basic goals like independence, free markets, rule of law, membership in NATO and the EU, but with a proliferation of small parties squabbling about the details of policy implementation and the sharing of assets. Coalition governments, often hanging by a thread, became the order of the day.

I suppose this was inevitable because Latvian society is quite heterogeneous and still in flux. You know, political parties reflect the societies out of which they spring. If you have a fragmented society, then you're going to have a fragmented political system. You also have, in Latvia, a tendency to think of a political party as sort of like a church – you know, either it meets *all* your needs or you're not going to join it at all. A reluctance to compromise on issues. So that creates a strong pressure for small parties representing a narrow range of interests, and that doesn't work well on the national scene. What the answer to that is I really am not sure.

Q: Did you have a reflection of what developed into the Russian mafia? I mean, the criminal element. Did that spill over into Latvia at all?

SILINS: To some extent, yes. In the early stages we had a few economic assassinations, killings that were clearly the product of struggle between organized crime groups. Luckily that didn't last

long. Then organized crime took a different form. It spilled into politics in a way that was only quasi illegal. It took the form that the World Bank calls “state capture.” That is, more or less legal business groups buying influence from parliamentarians and in effect buying legislation or controlling candidates to political office. And that still remains a problem in Latvia today, as it does throughout much of the world, including the U.S.

Q: The Clinton Administration when it came in was focused rather heavily on the economy. Was there a change from Bush I Administration to the Clinton Administration?

SILINS: As regards policy toward Latvia I would say, no. It was sort of ironic. When Reagan was succeeded by the first President Bush, there seemed to be more of a change as regards policy toward the Soviet Union, even though they were from the same political party, than in the transition from Bush, who was a Republican, to Clinton, a Democrat, vis-à-vis Baltic policy. In part, I think that was because the National Security Council staff, as I recall, remained largely the same, so the professionals working the problem showed a lot of continuity. Also the Latvian-Americans and other Baltic-Americans remained very active on Capitol Hill and throughout Washington, keeping the Baltic story in front of political leaders and the public.

At that time the Baltic States were still seen as interesting and got quite a lot of press. You know, their fate was not yet a fully resolved problem. People still saw them as, not exactly cliffhangers, but exciting success stories. The underdog who makes it. The Three Mice Who Roared. Americans love that kind of story. So I think, Clinton, he’s politically very smart, he knows how to read a situation. He knew that this was the kind of thing it was important to remain on the right side of. So I found no problem at all, really, no threat of change of policy, and indeed Bill Clinton was the first sitting president to visit the Baltic States in person.

Q: How did that visit go?

SILINS: Very well. It was really a visit to all three Baltic leaders, not just Latvia. They were all assembled in Riga, the Baltic heads of state, and met with him. Clinton’s stay in Riga was very short but packed with a lot of ceremony, such as a mass gathering at the foot of Latvia’s Freedom Monument, that was meant to convey a strong, positive public impression. It was as much a message, I think, to Moscow as it was to the local population, a sign that the U.S. cares at the very highest level about the fate of these countries, is willing to show the president’s own personal interest and engagement with them. And in that respect I think it was highly successful. Not least, the weather was brilliant, beautiful. Elizabeth escorted Hillary, my son Nicholas squired Chelsea, and a good time was had by all.

Q: Did you have a feeling that we were continually, during this period, laying down markers, that we care about this, and these countries are going to stay this way, this is not something that is interesting but will go away?

SILINS: Definitely.

Q: Staking out territory, in a way.

SILINS: Yes. Well, we hoped it was staking out territory, not in the sense that we're staking our claim to it, but that these are independent countries, they are an integral part of the West, part of Western Europe, part of the Transatlantic Alliance, and that while we did not mean to use them to threaten Russia, we would not look kindly on attempts to meddle with their basic rights.

Q: Did the Russian Fleet play any role or was it more concerned about glowing at night or something like that?

SILINS: Well, I recall one of my journal entries from the spring of '93. The Soviet Fleet, now the Russian Fleet, which had moved out of Liepāja and was now operating out of nearby Kaliningrad, engaged in threatening war games off the coast of Latvia. So there was gesturing also from the other side, as if to say: No, we are not gone yet, we still think of the Baltic as our lake and we feel that we have a right to dictate what might affect the security of this region. There was signaling going both ways.

Q: Well Ints, is there anything else we should talk about concerning this Latvian period that you can think of?

SILINS: There is a lot we haven't touched on but maybe we can cover some of it in the next phase. After I left Latvia I spent two years at the University of Chicago, and one of my activities there was a Baltic conference that covered some of these issues. And of course there is more material about my time in Latvia in the journal that I will attach to this interview.

Here I might just add that the fate of the Baltic States gains added interest and importance, as former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt pointed out, because they serve as a litmus test of Russian policy. That is, how Russia deals with them, particularly now that they are in the EU, is a very good indicator of how Russia sees its relationship with all of Western Europe. It reveals the Russian hand. If Russia acts as though it has the right to dictate to these near neighbors, what they call their "near abroad," then that suggests that they're likely to deal in a similar manner, if they can get away with it, with other West European countries. If they're inclined to cut off natural gas supplies to Latvia because they're angry at Latvia for some political reason, then they might cut off the gas supply to Germany if they are angry at Germans. So the Baltic area, I think, has an ability to shed light on larger issues.

Q: Okay, Ints, we're going to pick up on talking about some final thoughts about your time in Latvia, and you were talking about the relationship of the ambassador to the Washington establishment.

SILINS: Right. It was my experience, and I think it's not an atypical one, that I as ambassador wasn't used as effectively as I might have been, in the sense that issues seemed to gravitate more toward Washington-based high level officials, either by phone or personal visit. This has been pretty much the rule since the era of fast communications and the Kissinger global junkets, in which I participated when I served on the Executive Secretariat. More and more, the "normal" way to handle big foreign-policy questions became to have someone from Washington do it. The result is that foreign countries don't take ambassadors as seriously as they might, because

ambassadors are not identified with the resolution of top-level issues. There's no need, I think, to cite any particular examples of this...

Q: But you might cite the one in New York.

SILINS: Yes, well, when President Clinton had a meeting with the three Baltic presidents in New York in September 1993, he did not invite his own ambassadors to those countries to sit in. I was in New York at the time to give a talk to the Council on Foreign Relations and to meet with George Kennan, and I did sit in on another meeting with Latvian President Ulmanis in New York, but none of the three U.S. Baltic ambassadors was in the meeting with President Clinton. If I were one of those Baltic presidents, I could only conclude that the three U.S. ambassadors seemed not to enjoy ready access to Clinton, so they may not be an integral part of the top-level foreign policy process.

From the point of view of U.S. interests, implicitly downgrading your ambassadors is not a constructive way to use your foreign policy tools. Many issues arise that are important but lack the towering urgency needed to get them onto the desk of the president or the secretary of state. Those issues have to be resolved, and the logical person to do that would be the ambassador. But if his influence has been undercut by being left out at key moments, it becomes harder for him to accomplish that.

I don't want to exaggerate here; I did not feel that I was an insignificant part of the apparatus. And of course it's also up to the ambassador to establish his credentials as a serious player in foreign policy. I just think that ambassadors could be used more effectively by the U.S. rather than trying to do so much out of Washington.

Q: Well also, you know, it's true in so many countries where the ambassadors understand its culture, I mean... The prime example always is dealing with, you might say, Arab kings or with the Japanese. When high level people come out, they go in with a request or something and they come back and the report is oh, we'll certainly think that over, and the ambassador or somebody will say, you know, that wasn't a good meeting; he said no. I mean, this happens again and again. If you know the culture, one sees an opening or something that somebody who's flying in from Washington doesn't really understand.

SILINS: Right. I think the issue is more acute with countries that are in a position to do us real harm if they are misinterpreted and mishandled. Latvia was not such a case, fairly obviously; Latvia is quite dependent on the U.S., grateful to the U.S. for saving it from becoming a permanent part of Russia, and therefore was going to listen to me no matter how I was treated by the president and the secretary of state. But it's a general issue that merits consideration in some other forum.

Q: All right. I don't know if I've asked you, but something I've never understood: what do you do in a country when the inflation rate is 1,000 percent? I go back to Yugoslavia where the dinar was about 25 cents to the dollar. I've seen a bill for half a trillion dinars. Now, what the hell do you do?

SILINS: The recent poster child, of course, is Zimbabwe, where the exchange rate just went out of sight. In Latvia, blessedly, that period did not last very long. It was handled, first of all, by issuing a transitional currency, the Latvian ruble, to replace the Russian ruble. Then, when conditions were judged right, luckily not much later, a Latvian currency called the lat, or *lats* in Latvian, was launched. To general surprise, it appreciated steadily against the dollar and became one of the most stable currencies in the Western World. It was first loosely tied to an IMF basket of currencies, then to the euro, and it has maintained its value steadily, year in, year out, until the present day. Now, because the Latvian economy like all other economies is having a setback, it has been threatened by rumors of devaluation, but it has not weakened and it has been a very safe place to keep your money.

But your question was, what do you do when you have that inflation rate? You do a lot less shopping and you do more bartering. You rely more on your own resources, you eat your own garden products. You share things and swap things until the problem goes away. The main impact was that everybody's savings were wiped out, so it was everybody scrubbing the board clean and starting all over. And that was devastating for pensioners and others without income who were looking to their savings to get them through the tough times.

KEITH C. SMITH
Chargé d'Affaires
Tallinn, Estonia (1994-1995)

Ambassador Keith C. Smith was born in California in 1938. While attending Brigham Young University he received his bachelor's degree in 1960 and master's degree in 1962. He entered the Foreign Service in 1962. His career includes positions in Mexico, Venezuela Hungary, Washington D.C., and an ambassadorship to Lithuania. Mr. Smith was interviewed by Charles Stuart Kennedy in February 2004.

Q: So when were you off to Estonia?

SMITH: ...July '94 to December '94. The embassy in Tallinn was relatively new. Bob Frasure had been our first ambassador to Estonia following the country's liberation from the Soviet Union in 1991. Bob and I became good friends. It was a terrible blow to so many of us to learn of his death later on in Bosnia. I don't know if I had made clear that I was in Tallinn without my family. Originally, I had hoped that my family could join me. My step-son's accident made this impossible, so I made several trips back to Washington during my six months as chargé and met each time with Bob Frasure, who was a DAS in the European Bureau. But it was an interesting time in Estonian history. The ethnic Estonians and most ethnic Russians were delighted at being independent from the Moscow. A third of the country was ethnic Russians. The transition to independence had been peaceful in Estonia, although not so much in Latvia and Lithuania where Russian troops fired on demonstrators and border guards. It was an impressively peaceful transition when one considers that at least a third of the population of all three countries had

either died or been imprisoned by the Soviets. Not one Russian was ever killed as a result of retaliation by the population. Not one. The world has overlooked this remarkable fact.

Anyway, the most important issue on my plate in Tallinn was our attempt to persuade the Russians to withdraw the rest of their troops from the Baltic States. I became heavily involved in the negotiations with the Russian military. Congress had authorized \$50 million as a "buy out" for Russian officers still living in Estonia and Latvia, so that they could buy themselves housing in Russia. It was something that the Russian government was not excited about. They wanted to keep their officers in the Baltic States. Although they didn't like this idea of a pullout, they were being pressured by President Clinton and the Congress to get the troops out. Clinton pressured President Yeltsin very hard in confidential correspondence. There was some pressure from the Europeans, but it was mainly Clinton and the U.S. Congress and their threats to cut off assistance to Russia, that made Yeltsin pull out the approximately 15,000 officers still in Estonia and Latvia.

It was an interesting experience negotiating with the Russians. One could see that the Russian Government, and particularly the Defense Ministry, would willingly abandon its officers to their own devices. The Russian military High Command and the General Staff of the Russian military were about as corrupt an organization as I had ever seen. Money which had been set aside by the Russian government for building housing in the Leningrad military district and in other places in Russia was siphoned off illegally by high-ranking officers in Moscow. Much of the housing built in Russia for officers from the Baltic region were sold and the money pocketed before the officers from Estonia and Latvia could return. It was quite a depressing experience to see how the Russian military operated.

In the end, the last contingent of officers left Estonia and Latvia on August 30th, 1994. It was quite a day. I remember walking around town and asking Estonians what they thought about it. I thought they'd be delirious. To a person, they said, "they'll be back." At that time, they couldn't even imagine being members of NATO and the EU. Considering their terrible experience at the hand of Moscow, they felt the Russians would find some excuse to come back in.

Q: It's a whole different system, but I was in Kyrgyzstan around this time, and all the small shops and the plumbers and the people who kind of did things, were Russian. And the Kyrgyz were the bureaucrats, but it was the Russians who really kept the economy going. I wouldn't think it would be the same thing in Estonia.

SMITH: Not as much in Estonia. Nevertheless, during the Soviet years, the Russians rigged the educational and political system in favor of ethnic Russians, even if they were recent "immigrants" from other parts of the empire. Any Estonian (or Latvian or Lithuanian) who was well educated or a high status before the occupation in 1940 was either sent to Siberia or their children were not allowed to attend universities. There was serious discrimination against them in Estonia and Latvia, although not quite as much in Lithuania. Naturally the top jobs in industry and in the Communist Party apparatus were occupied by Russians. As a result, the farmers in Estonia were almost uniformly ethnic Estonians. In every other walk of life, there had been

positive discrimination in favor of the Russian minority. The largest apartments in Tallinn were occupied by Russian Party members or Russian officials of one kind or another. Russian had been the official language in all three Baltic States. Non-Russians had been forced to use it at all public functions, even in post offices.

Q: What was the Estonian political system? Who was at the top at that time?

SMITH: When I arrived in Tallinn, the Homeland Party was running the government. The country was operating under a new, very democratic constitution, one that had been endorsed by the EU and the U.S. At the time, the prime minister was Mart Laar, a grand old man of 32 years old. He later returned for a second stint as prime minister and is still active as a member of the Rigi Kogu (parliament). In 1994, the foreign minister, Juri Luik, was 26. He's now the Estonian Ambassador to Washington. They were young, idealistic and open to new ideas. I often had lunch with the prime minister and developed close relations with the foreign minister. Estonia was unusual, in that unlike most of the former Soviet states, the old party and government officials had been permanently sidelined. Many of the young people, some who had been members of the communist youth organization, but who hated communism, took over the country quickly after 1991. On the whole, they were young, energetic and very western-oriented. This was the case more so in Estonia than in Latvia and Lithuania. It is still that way today. In Estonia these young leaders immediately adopted free market economic ideas borrowed from the U.S. economist, Milton Friedman. They quickly instituted a flat tax and they lifted almost all of the import barriers and taxes. It was one of the most impressive transformations from communism to free-market democracy. During the first few years of independence, Estonia grew faster than the other two Baltic States or any other former communist country in Central Europe.

The Estonians made some mistakes, but they quickly discovered what worked and what did not. This was one reason why it was an interesting period to be in Estonia. I developed a real emotional attachment to the people, particularly when they were still being threatened by Russia. The President and Foreign Minister asked for my advice from time to time regarding Estonia's relations with Moscow. At the top of the list was the negotiation on Russian troop withdrawal. The Russians used a lot of the same pressure tactics with Estonia that I later saw in Lithuania during negotiations with a U. S. energy company. For instance, if negotiations are difficult, Moscow will often demand that the other side replace its principle negotiator. Unfortunately, the Estonians caved into that demand when they went to Moscow to finalize the troop withdrawal agreement. This is an old Soviet/Russian tactic that too often works, even with West Europeans.

Anyway, we became involved with the Estonia-Russian border negotiations. I made a trip to one of the disputed part of the border. It was being unilaterally demarked by Russian officials, a clear violation of the Helsinki Agreements. Demarking of borders in Europe was supposed to be done by mutual agreement or by a recognized international tribunal. In this instance, Russians demarked the border unilaterally, and they decided which territory was theirs and which territory would be in Estonia. In any case, when I visited the border in Viru Province, in the southeast of the country, I was immediately threatened by Russian soldiers, who pointed their Kalashnikov rifles at me. I tried, but failed to get Washington to support pushing Moscow into agreeing to multilateral negotiations in accordance with the Helsinki Agreements. Nobody in Washington or Brussels wanted to take up this issue with the Russian Government. The Estonians were afraid to

raise too much diplomatic fuss without international support. They still feared the Russians too much to tackle the issue alone. So, Moscow got away with unilateral border demarcation and the present borders were established in this fashion.

Shamefully, Western governments, including the U.S. eventually pressured the Estonians and Latvians to support Russian border demands (within a year after I left). Even when the U.S. government pushed the Estonians and Latvians to give into Russia's negotiating position, Moscow would only return with new "requirements." After we received quiet promises from the Russian government that they would sign a border agreement if the Estonians and Latvians gave in regarding Moscow's position, the Kremlin demanded that there be a joint Russian-Estonian (and Russian- Latvian) commission to preview the ethnic relationships in these two countries. Moscow found reason after reason not to say yes to an agreement. To this day, the Estonians and Latvians do not have a ratified border agreement with Russia, nor does any other former Soviet republic except for Lithuania. The Russians have purposely refused to sign border agreements with anybody but Lithuania until now. Lithuania has one because under the Baltic States were being taken into the EU and Moscow needed a corridor across Lithuania so that Russians could easily travel between Kaliningrad and the rest of Russia. But that's the only one border agreement between Russia and a Baltic State. Russia keeps the border situations unclear with most of their neighbors for a variety of political reasons.

Q: In the political system in the Baltic States, were young Russians sort of joining in or were they or were they sitting to one side and waiting.

SMITH: For the first few years, they were not encouraged to participate. They didn't speak Estonian, and to be in the parliament and in the military officer corps one had to speak the language. Many people, particularly older Russian resisted learning Baltic languages. Gradually the young ethnic Russians in Estonia and Latvia have learned the local languages and are moving into responsible positions. One needs to take into account the new Russians and the old Russians in the Baltic States. From the late 1800s, a large group of Russians lived in Estonia and Latvia, many of whom were Jewish intellectuals, but also many Orthodox Christians. Those people usually spoke the Baltic languages. Some of these individual (or their descendants) ran for parliament very early on, and they formed ethnic Russian parties to support minority rights. For the others, it has taken time to learn the language, graduate from universities, and then assimilate. Often they've done what a lot of minorities in other countries did who felt like they were discriminated against or felt as outsiders. They moved into the business world, where many have been very successful. .

Over time, the focus of Russians shifted from organized crime to legitimate business, where they're often very good. I met some terrific young Russians who were running textile factories and steel fabricating companies in Estonia. They are clever enough to hold their own anywhere. Foreign businessmen used to tell me that some of the young ethnic Russians in the eastern part of Estonia could compete anywhere in the business world. It has taken time, but they have made a lot of progress. There are good reasons why most Russians stayed in the Baltics. They were so much better off than their relatives in Russia. One of the guards at the residence in front of the house I was living in made a point of telling me that he lived better than his relatives in Omsk. He said, "I have a country house here, I have a car, we have meat on the table every day. I'm

really well off." Meanwhile, there was a constant drumbeat of charges from Moscow alleging discrimination, even charging ethnic cleansing against the Russian minority.

The Estonians took the criticism in stride. The director of the Estonian national library told me that during the Soviet period she was on the bus going home from work. She overheard two Russian families on the bus talking to each other. The family living in Estonia was bragging to their relatives from Russia about how well-off they were. They mentioned that they had a large apartment, they had a car and they had all of this and that. But they added that one problem remained. After the people from Russia asked what it was, the Russian residing in Estonia said, "Unfortunately there are still Estonians here." The fact that this was said in front of a busload of Estonians just typifies Russian insensitive. It was the kind of remark that Estonians and Latvians heard repeatedly from Russians over the 50 years of occupation. To this day, the Russian government's official position is that the Baltic States voluntarily joined the Soviet Union in 1940, ignoring the forced incorporation into the Soviet Union under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Treaty. This position was reiterated by the Russian government as late as 2004, and it remains Moscow's official position. One of the reasons that the Balts were so anxious to become members of NATO and EU so quickly was the constant drum beat of hostility from Russian. Opinion polls in Russia still show that Estonia and Latvia are along with the U.S., the countries Russians consider to be their primary enemies.

Q: While you were there, the expectation was somehow or another, the Russians haven't let us go.

SMITH: Russians can still not let go. Back in 1993, Moscow signed free trade agreement with the three Baltic States. As soon as the Balts asked that Russian troops be withdrawn, the Kremlin imposed double tariffs on all Baltic products. In 1992 when the issue was first raised about sending home Russian troops, Moscow cut off all of the energy exports to the Baltic States in the hope of forcing the Balts to give in and allow Russian troops to remain. Energy flows have been cut off several times since for political reasons. I was in Riga and Tallinn in the very cold winter of 1992, and it was very uncomfortable in the hotels. The Balts had to reduce indoor temperatures to eight degrees Celsius, so we slept in our clothes at night. That was a typical attempt to squeeze the Balts. Russian policy was instrumental in pushing the Balts closer to the West. It was a very stupid policy by the Kremlin. I've talked to some Russians who recognize that the policy of hostility is self-defeating, but they were a lonely minority. Russian hostility is driven by hurt pride and latent imperialism. The collapse of the Soviet Union was traumatic for most Russians. They knew that their country was relatively poor and not internationally respected, but being large and powerful gave them something to be proud of. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting chaos in Russia took this away from them.

Q: Were there any Estonians who were still stuck in Siberia or were they all dead?

SMITH: There were some still stuck there. There are still Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians living in Siberia; most of them too old to make the trip back. I had dinner with a Lithuanian friend of mine a few weeks ago. He had just taken his children to Siberia because that's where he was born. His family was exiled during the czarist period, and he was born in Siberia. He and his family were again sent to Siberia during the Soviet period. He went with his children to the

village in Siberia where Lithuanians still live. Those who could, primarily the younger ones, left in the early 1990s. Of course, some had married Russians and did not want to leave. Now, it's becoming harder Russian permission to leave, except for the aged.

Q: What about relations back in the States? I would think that when things opened up an awful lot of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians who had come to the United States flocked back. I'd experienced some of these when I was in Germany with the Germans who went to the United States during the Hitler time, really more before the Hitler time when the currency collapsed. And then came back in the early '50s or so and were all set to tell their German cousins how to run things, you know. I would have thought this would have been for someone in your position an awful lot of hyphenated Americans meddling in your work.

SMITH: That is a good point. There were a lot of Baltic immigrants who went back to the three counties with the intention of helping make the transformation to Western-style societies. There were not many Estonian immigrants in the U.S. Most of the former Estonian refugees went to Sweden and Canada. There were only about 50,000 in the U.S. in 1991. Many returned, however, from Sweden, Canada and Australia. There were about 150,000 Latvians in the U.S. and at least an equal amount in Canada. The largest number of Baltic people s in the U.S. had come from Lithuania.

While I was in Estonia, the chief of defense was an Estonian-American, who had been a colonel in the U.S. Army. He had been brought over by President Lennart Meri, who expected the American to revamp the military and be a close collaborator of the President. Unfortunately, the colonel couldn't keep quiet about domestic politics. He repeatedly accused the Estonians of being corrupt. He made life miserable for the president who had befriended him. It was a disaster. I remember President Meri asking me what he should do about the man. The President thought that I could persuade the colonial to stay out of politics. I tried to convince the colonial that he was only damaging his own effectiveness, but his ego was just too much of a problem. Eventually, the president fired him. He then turned on President Meri and ran for president in the next election. He didn't even come close. He was a disaster. I remember going back to Estonia and seeing him in one of the major hotels. He'd sit in the lobby and grab anybody who would come by and try to talk to them about how badly he had been treated. He was a sad case.

I saw a couple of similar cases, although not quite so bad, in Latvia. There were a couple of retired U.S. military guys in the defense ministry of Latvia, including one who was made minister. Neither of them lasted more than six months. Many young Estonians who returned from abroad made substantial contributions and have settled down in the country. Many of Estonia's best diplomats were born abroad of Estonian born parents. Some are among the best I have met. The generation that left in 1945 often had problems adjusting to the changes that had taken place under communism.

Q: It never works. You watch this again and again. It just doesn't work.

SMITH: Sometimes it does. I saw many successful cases of Lithuanian-Americans who made significant contributions to the country. There were fewer in Estonia and Latvia, but even in those two countries I know of examples of success.

Q: How about the Canadians?

SMITH: The president of Latvia today is a Canadian-Latvian and she is very successful. Two very talented Estonian diplomats that I know were born in Canada.

Q: Did the Canadian embassy, because of the number there, play a role?

SMITH: No, they did not play much of a role. The Germans tried to be influential players in the Baltics, but they came across as too arrogant, perhaps unfairly. The Finns tried to be big brother. In any case, I was only chargé for six months before returning to the U.S. for family reasons. I earlier mentioned that my step-son who had been badly injured. He had been in a coma for almost a month and was facing a long and uncertain recovery. After I was back in the U.S., however, President Mari and Foreign Minister Luik, who's now the ambassador here, wrote a letter to the secretary of state asking if the U.S. would send me to Estonia from time to time in order to advise the Foreign Minister on establishing a new foreign ministry and diplomatic service. The letter to Secretary Christopher arrived about a month after I left in December of 1994. In any case, I had to return to Tallinn later in December to cover for the then chargé, who had to return to the U.S. for a month of compassionate leave. But after the Secretary approved the request, I traveled from Washington to Tallinn and back several times over the next two years, advising three successive foreign ministers. I never asked if was legal, but AID paid for my expenses and State paid for my salary. I was Director of Foreign Area Studies here at FSI during the same period of time.

Actually, I started advising the Estonians even before I was at FSI. I spent a total of another six months in Estonia. It was an interesting experience. I had an office right next to the foreign minister and I helped them set up security systems and talked to them about management issues. Most of the time, however, was spent advising them on foreign policy questions, particularly regarding how to deal with Moscow. Later, we discovered that the Russians had taped my phone during one two-week stay in the Ministry.

Q: This is from '91 to...

SMITH: This is from early 1995 through 1996.

Q: How did Estonia deal with the other Baltic states. As an American, we always lump these countries together. But what was the relation between them?

SMITH: It has always been a complicated relationship. Each country wants to be treated as unique, but they all wanted to be dealt with in the same way. We never admitted to lumping them together, but then we would do it in the next sentence. Often, it was just easier and more beneficial to treat them in the same way. There was a sense of being a Baltic person, and they had worked together to free themselves from the Soviet Union. There was a lot of collaboration between the Baltic States. They had a feeling that they had to stick together in order to survive Russian pressure. For the first few years there was a lot of collegiality. Eventually, as they became more independent, there was some splintering. There are strong ethnic ties between the

Latvians and the Lithuanians, but not as much with the Estonians. There are regular Baltic presidents, prime ministers, foreign ministers and defense ministers' meetings. The Estonians quickly decided that they were different (perhaps superior) than the rest, and that they were more Nordic than Baltic. Toomas Ilves, the former Estonian ambassador to Washington, started the talk about being Nordic. This kind of talk made the Latvians and Lithuanians somewhat angry, since there was an implication that the Estonians are better than the rest. Each Baltic State constantly compares itself against the other two when it comes to unemployment, GDP, number of people committing suicide. Every month, one would see figures come out comparing all three countries on various issues. They still wonder constantly about how they are doing relative to the other two. So, it is natural that outsiders too often lump the three together. Now they're all members of NATO, they're all three going to be in the EU. In some ways, this will allow them more individuality, in the sense that they're part of a larger whole and they won't just be considered Balts. They will be EU members and NATO members. In reality, they are as different from each other as the Scandinavians are.

Q: Was there any overlapping border claims or problems?

SMITH: Not between the Baltic States. Latvia and Lithuania had a dispute over territorial waters, but it never became contentious. They worked it out. They had so many problems with Russia that they didn't want to do anything that would weaken their solidarity. The Germans were somewhat active in the commercial side. In fact the German, Danish and Finnish embassies were located in the Foreign Ministry building for a few years. When I became an advisor to the Estonian foreign ministry, the Germans were very ticked off. They thought they were better qualified to advise the Estonians. The Finns who had sent an advisor to the Foreign Ministry, but he had been pretty much ignored. The Finns also resented my role. In the Ministry's elevator I would often meet Germans or Finns and they let me know that the Estonians should not be listening to an American. I just shrugged it off.

Q: You mentioned the corruption angle. Russia, I don't know if they've shut it completely, but they're moving out of this robber baron, but even more than that it's almost a Mafia-type situation of controlling things. When Estonia became free, were there sort of public concerns, utilities, railroads, lumber mills up for grabs, and how did they do?

SMITH: While organized crime was a serious problem in the ten years after independence, it was never on as large a scale in the Baltic States as in Russia. It was a bigger problem in Estonia than in Latvia and Lithuania during the first few years, but that diminished over time. Even so, in Estonia in the mid-1990s, there were seven known organized criminal groups. I arranged to bring to Estonia representatives from all major U.S. law enforcement organizations to look at the situation. As a result, the FBI established an office at the Embassy in Tallinn to help train law enforcement personnel in all the Baltic States, but particularly in Estonia. The FBI also dealt with criminal cases that had a U.S. connection.

Of those seven criminal groups in Estonia, all were led by ethnic Russians. There was the Perm Group, the Krosnadarsk Group, etc., all identified by where the leadership had ties to in Russia.

There was also substantial criminal activity which passed through Estonia from Russia. This was a period when many Russians were stripping precious metals out of utility lines, power plants, and even ballistic missiles. They were shipping copper wire and other precious metals by rail to the Baltic ports, and then on to Sweden, Finland and other countries in Europe. It was all being organized by criminal groups in Russia, using their connections with colleagues in the Baltic States and in Western Europe. Ironically, Moscow publicly blamed the Balts for the illegal metals traffic, but the people who were stripping it out and moving it to the West were Russians.

In early 1994, before I went to Estonia, I traveled from Moscow to Riga, Latvia on the overnight train and had a compartment to myself. Just before approaching the Latvian border, about four o'clock in the morning, there was a banging on my compartment door. I opened the door, and there were two guys in uniforms with Kalashnikov rifles. I immediately assumed that they were there to provoke some incident or to shake me down for money. I even thought that it could be even more serious. I attempted to explain to the two soldiers that I was a diplomat, with the normal immunities. These guys didn't care who I was. They marched in, and instead of drawing a weapon, they pulled out a metal detector and went around the ceiling of my compartment to check if I was trying to illegally export precious metal. When they didn't find anything, they saluted and walked out. That was it. It was a bizarre kind of experience, but I figured that either someone had failed to pay them off for a shipment expected to come through, or they were two of the very rare honest border guards. Large quantities of small arms were also being exported out from Russia through the Baltic ports. In Russia, people were stealing everything they could get their hands on. Today, crime in Russia is no less than in the 1990s, but it is usually more sophisticated and somewhat less violent.

When I lived in Estonia, one of our local employees had a brother who was a policeman. I remember her telling me that he and his colleagues were afraid to stop any luxury car that was painted black and had darkened windows. The local police were afraid of retaliation by Russian Mafia members. The consequences of stopping the "wrong person" could be horrible, either for the policeman or members of his family. It was like the "wild west" in Estonia and Latvia for a few years. It was tough to bring the criminal groups under control. They had more fire power, money and intelligence than did the authorities. The police were delighted when one crime figure was murdered by a competing group; and it happened frequently. Crime and corruption was somewhat different in Lithuania during this same period. Members of the gangs were both ethnic Russian and Lithuanian. However, in Estonia and Latvia, almost all organized crime was carried out by ethnic Russians.

Q: During the time you were there, both as chargé and then as a consultant, did things change?

SMITH: Yes, but only marginally. The local police, with the help of U.S. and European police forces, were able to reduce the level of organized crime. The U.S. and several Scandinavian countries helped train and equip the local police and assisted in setting up a more effective intelligence agency, that would also be able get a handle on Russian spying in the Baltics. The U.S. did a considerable amount of police training in all three countries. There's still corruption and spying emanating from Russia, but it is nothing like the early or mid-1990s. At that time, Russian intelligence officers were running roughshod over the Estonians. Because of the heavy handed attempts by Moscow to intimidate the Estonians, Russian influence in the country

declined quicker than it would have otherwise. The Balts are difficult people to intimidate. When Russia cut off trade in an attempt to apply political pressure, the move only increased Estonia's trade with the West. Also, the people adversely affected by Moscow's economic pressure were usually ethnic Russians, who worked in the industrial sector, particularly in Tallinn and near the Russian border. It was a stupid policy on the part of Kremlin leaders, but they were following their emotions, rather than logic in dealing with the Baltic States.

Q: Were you able to see in this period a change because of technology, communications and all of this, and how did the Estonians fit in to the computer age?

SMITH: Young Estonians jumped right into the cyber age. Within a short time, they were ahead of the U.S. in computer and cell phone use. These young Estonians got a head start over the Latvians and Lithuanians, who were still burdened by leadership from the communist era. I remember working in the Foreign Ministry and feeling like such a fool because everybody knew more about computers than I did. They were getting the news on line every day. This was back in 1995, long before anyone in the State Department had on-line access to international news. Many young ethnic Russians also quickly mastered the cyber world and were using it to gain advantage over some of the ethnic Estonians. A professor I knew at Estonia's technical university taught a class in technology. His class was composed of about half Estonians and half Russians. Even though he was an ethnic Estonia, he told me that almost all of his top students were ethnic Russians. Also noteworthy, was the fact that the class was taught in Estonian. As members of an ethnic minority, they recognized that they had to try harder and be more clever than the ethnic Estonians in order to get ahead. Although many young Russians were able to adapt very quickly, their parents could not. The over 40 age group could not adjust to a market economy and having to take responsibility for their own jobs and welfare.

Q: What kind of academic and cultural ties did they have to the United States? Was much happening there?

SMITH: The Embassy and the Fulbright Commission sponsored many students to the U.S., but Estonia's cultural and academic ties were closest to Finland and Sweden. There was a professor Taagapera at the University of Tartu. He was an Estonian-American and had taught for many years at the University of California. He arranged for several Estonian students to study at American universities. George Soros, the American financier, had established a branch of his Open Society in each of the Baltic States, and his people helped develop educational and cultural exchanges with Europe and the United States. On the military side, the United States carried out more training and exchanges than any other country. Estonia maintained some military ties with their counterparts in Sweden and Finland, but the U.S. went in with full-time advisors very quickly, and we helped equip their new military forces. Eventually, the Swedes granted considerable military help to all three Baltic States.

Q: What about English? Was English supplanting Russian?

SMITH: Yes. It seemed as if everybody wanted to learn English. I even saw Japanese set up English language teaching sessions. Even with their heavy accents, independent Japanese made money teaching English in the early years after independence. Some Estonian leaders, such as

President Lennart Meri, spoke eight languages, including English. The Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister, then ages 32 and 26, spoke very good English. Everyone could speak Russian, of course, but English was taking over as the second language. English is the business language today in Russia and Poland, and in the entire region, with the exception of Hungary, where German is the second language. Young people did not want to learn Russian, since it was seen as the language of imperialism. Today, more university students in the three Baltic States are learning Russian in addition to English because they see it's useful for doing business in the region. But the number one foreign language study is still English.

Q: Did Poland play any part in the Baltics?

SMITH: The Poles didn't play much of a role in Estonia or Latvia, but they were more prominent in Lithuania. From 1989 to about 1994, Poland was preoccupied with its own reconstruction. In the early days, Polish-Lithuania relations were quite contentious, because Poland forcibly took over much of Lithuania after the First World War. Lithuania's capital became Vilna, a Polish city, until returned to Lithuania in 1940. Lithuanians still resented Poland's seizure of its territory. After 1945, there were villages in Lithuania that were occupied entirely by ethnic Poles, and Lithuanians who were trapped in Poland. Over time, however, Poles and Lithuanians recognized that their mutual hostility only created opportunities for mischief by Russia. By 1995-96, relations took a sharp turn for the better and both countries worked to reconcile the foreign communities in their midst.

Q: Kaliningrad? That's sort of an anomaly.

SMITH: Kaliningrad was always on the agenda when I was in Lithuania, but not so much during my period in Estonia. In any case, Kaliningrad had been the largest Soviet/Russian military base on the Baltic Sea. It gained a reputation of being the "black hole of Europe," with the highest AIDS rate on the continent and enormous poverty. A million people, almost all of them poor, lived next door to a Lithuania and Poland that started off much richer, and with a wealth gap that was only increasing between them and Kaliningrad. Kaliningrad is still a neglected part of Russia. It receives little economic help from Moscow. The Kremlin is afraid of it becoming too westernized and that the population will demand more independence from Moscow. The lack of support from the rest of Russia is resented in Kaliningrad and that increases the suspicion of the enclave in Moscow.

Q: I'm just trying to think what was happening in the United States then.

SMITH: Clinton was president during that period of time, and his administration gave considerable support to Baltic independence. Without Clinton's strong demarches to Yeltsin, Russian troops would not have withdrawn in 1994. The U.S. was very popular in all of Eastern Europe during that period.

Q: Sort of from the optic of Estonia, what was the view of Yeltsin during this period?

SMITH: Yeltsin was reasonably respected for his recognition of Baltic independence in August 1991, shortly after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Thank goodness, Putin had not been

president at the time. To this day, Putin keeps talking about what a terrible disaster the breakup of Soviet Union had been. In the mid-1990s, however, the Balts were just relieved to be independent. There was a feeling in the Baltic States that Yeltsin was not such a bad guy, at least compared with the others in the Kremlin. Later, for domestic political effect, he would make nationalistic statements which would irritate the Balts. Many of Yeltsin's advisors could not accept Baltic independence and they kept trying to erode the Baltic economies in an attempt to maintain Russian influence in the three countries. There was a feeling among some of Yeltsin's advisors that the Balts could not manage on their own, and with time they would come crawling back to Moscow for help. Russians resented what they believed to be Baltic ingratitude for all the benefits they had received as members of the Soviet Union. This view from Moscow of the world was to some extent shared by our embassy in Moscow. But Russians now say that they will stop subsidizing those who left the Soviet Union, without thinking about the benefits received by Russians from control over the region.

Q: Of course, there always has been this difference between the Baltic states and essentially the Slavs. The Slavs were getting something out of their relationship with the Soviet Union, where the Balts were essentially being milked.

SMITH: In 1940, the standard of living in the Baltic States was on a par with the rest of Europe. It was even higher than it was in Poland and in Norway. Even during the Soviet period, the Baltic republics had the highest standards of living of any of the 15 republics; much higher than in Russia itself. Relatively high living standards in Estonia were not a result of Russian good will. Russians sent to the Estonia and Latvia were poorly educated industrial workers who were immediately given advantages over the local people. At the same time, high-level Communist Party and bureaucrats used the Baltic beaches and the vast number of sanitariums and recreation facilities as a Russian playground. Some of these sanitariums would be below one-star level in the West, but were better than anything in Russia itself. I stayed at a couple of these cement monsters, that were built to pamper the nomenklatura. During the Soviet period, Russians either went to the Crimea, or they would go to the Baltic States to vacation and play. After independence, many Russians still continued to use the hotels and sanitariums along the Baltic coast. During the Soviet period, they didn't like to hear Estonian or Latvian spoken, and there are still places where the locals obligingly speak only Russian. I've talked to many from Russia who feel nostalgia for their Soviet-era vacations at Baltic coast resorts.

Q: Ok, well Lithuania in 1997, what was the situation there as you saw it?

SMITH: Lithuania was doing fairly well economically when I arrived. Of course, we all knew that in the 16th Century, Lithuania had once been a powerhouse in Central Europe and the people still felt proud of their heritage. Unfortunately, in the 20th Century, they had been independent from only 1919 to 1940, at which point the country was occupied by Stalin's Soviet Union. It formally regained its freedom in August 1991, when after the failed coups in Moscow, it was recognized by then President Boris Yeltsin as an independent country. During the 18th months before August 1991, however, Lithuanians and the people of the other two Baltic States carried out massive demonstrations in support of independence. In Lithuania, about 25

demonstrators were killed by Russian military forces during independence rallies, some of them crushed under tanks outside of the parliament building and at the Vilnius television tower. There were fewer deaths in Latvia and none in Estonia.

Q: How stood the Lithuanian contact in NATO when you arrived there?

SMITH: Like the other two Baltic countries, they were anxious to be members of the Alliance. The country's Chief of Defense was a former U.S. Army colonel and he was effective at building ties with NATO officials in Brussels and at the Pentagon in Washington. I personally thought it would be more difficult to get Lithuania into NATO than it turned out to have been. I thought it was going to be a stretch to get them in within the next 10 years. I was surprised at how smoothly it went. The Lithuanian-American Chief of Defense deserves much of the credit. The Lithuanians recognized early on that they had to create a military force that could credibly assist the Alliance. As a result, Lithuania was far ahead of the other two countries when it came to military preparedness. It was not only because they were the largest Baltic country, but the leadership put the financial and human resources into making their military attractive to NATO. It was an especially high priority for the younger generation of Lithuanian leaders. Several of the Lithuanian-American officers effectively used their old contacts in the Pentagon to secure surplus military equipment. They were able to explain better to their counterparts in the Pentagon why it was important to support Lithuania. They did a terrific job. In part, the Lithuanian military's success helped Estonia and Latvia become NATO members early than had been expected. It was due to their quick success in building a modern military force.

Q: A Soviet style military is not a NATO style military.

SMITH: In 1991, the three Baltic States inherited the remnants of indigenous Soviet forces. Therefore, the leadership in all three Baltic States had to build a military from scratch. The first task was to replace Soviet-trained military officers and reduce the number of officer slots, and to break the old Soviet military culture where conscripts and non-coms were treated badly. The U.S. had sent military trainers and advisors to all three Baltic States by 1993. Some U.S. personnel were there on long assignments, while others came in as part of two-week training teams.

We sent promising young officers and non-commissioned personnel to the service academies in the U.S. We sent others to specialized training at U.S. bases in Europe and in the U.S. so that they could see first hand how a modern military force operated. The British were also helpful and very good at training. They set up an effective system to train noncommissioned officers. In the Soviet/Russian military, a soldier was either an officer or cannon fodder. The British had pioneered the practice of giving responsibility and authority to non-commissioned officers. I believe that we adopted our system from the British. In any case, the goal in the Baltic States was to develop a large core of non-commissioned military personnel capable of taking the initiative and of leading under fire. Between the U.S. and the Brits, I think we did a very good job of developing a Western military culture and of purging their forces of Soviet-era thinking. One difficult issue in military reform was the problem of eliminating the Soviet practice of corruption

in procurement, promotions and benefits. Corruption is a major problem in today's Russian military, and it is not easy to root it out after so many years of practice

Q: Did Lithuania have a draft?

SMITH: They had a draft. Not everybody of course went in at the same time. University students were deferred. They did not need to take in all of the draft age males, so they instituted a lottery system, similar to the one we had in the U.S before 1980. As in the U.S., conscription in Lithuania was a way of socially integrating people from different ethnic and economic groups into society. The conscripts began to think of themselves as Lithuanians (or Latvians or Estonians in those two countries). Before I left Lithuania, all military conscripts were given an extensive briefing on the Holocaust, and the killing by Germans and their Lithuanian supporters of over 200,000 Jews within just a few weeks of the start of the war.

Q: The Baltic States contributed an awful lot to the furthering of the Holocaust. I mean, Baltic guards were infamous at a lot of these concentration camps.

SMITH: Yes, some were collaborators, but a few brave people put their own lives on the line to save Jews. We worked with the Justice Department to try to get some of the Lithuanian killers who had successfully immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1940s extradited back to Lithuania and brought to trial. The problem was that by the time they were extradited to Lithuania for trial, they were generally quite old and in poor health. Of course, those charged with holocaust crimes often exaggerated their health problems to avoid trial. We had to push very hard to get the Lithuanians to really publicize the fact that their own people had collaborated in war crimes. It was more of a problem in Lithuania than it was in Latvia and Estonia because that's where most of the Jews had lived. Before 1940, Vilnius had been a vibrant, almost majority Jewish city. The Litvaks (Jews from Lithuania) are an important part of Jewish history. Many prominent Americans and Europeans have ancestors who came from Vilnius or from villages in Lithuania. The Holocaust museum in Washington has a two story room dedicated to those murdered in Eisiskes, one small village in southeast Lithuania. Everyone in the town was killed in 1945. My wife and I visited the town on two occasions and we saw no remaining sign that Jews once composed the entire town's population.

Q: I assume there was a sizeable Russian minority in Lithuania?

SMITH: No, there are large Russian minorities in Estonia and Latvia. Lithuania did not suffer from as large an influx of Russian workers as Latvia and Estonia did during the Soviet period. In 1991, about 9% of people living in Lithuania were ethnic Russians. In Latvia and Estonia, the percentages were almost 40%. The largest minority in Lithuania were Poles. Poland and Lithuania have a complicated history of conflict and friendship. The Polish presence goes back centuries, but a large influx of Poles took place in the interim period between WW I and WW II. Therefore, Lithuania's most vexing problem after independence was with Polish Lithuanians, not

Russian Lithuanians. Lithuania does have a common border west with the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad. Because Russians, Poles and Belarusians were such small percentages in 1991, it was not a political problem for the Lithuanians to automatically grant everyone citizenship. So citizenship issues did not come up between Lithuania and Russia. In Estonia and Latvia, however, citizenship posed political difficulties for the ethnic Latvians and Estonians because the numbers were much larger. In addition, there had been sizeable Soviet military and intelligence forces (relatively speaking) in Estonia and Latvia. There are various theories as to why the Soviets did not send as many Russians to live in Lithuania, but I'm not sure that I accept any of the standard explanations. In any case, the low number of ethnic Russians was an advantage for Lithuania after independence.

Q: In a way were you sensing an attitude in a lot of Lithuanians that, give it time and that enclave will probably be included in our place?

SMITH: No. I think there's a feeling that someday Kaliningrad may develop economically and serve as a useful bridge to Russia itself. Vilnius wanted to see the region become less of a haven for smugglers and a source of HIV/AIDS. I don't think they have any illusions about it ever becoming part of Lithuania, or even becoming independent. Russia never gives up territory. Russian will generally do anything to avoid giving up territory, accounting for the country's many unsettled disputes with countries all along its borders.

Russians are more willing than most countries to maintain unsettled borders. There are still no border agreements with Estonia and Latvia, let alone with Japan and almost all of the Central Asian states. The mistaken view in Moscow is that this uncertainty regarding their neighbors borders would give Russia political leverage. In the mid to late 1990s, Moscow believed that not signing border agreements with the Baltic States would help keep them out of the EU and NATO. This has been a tactic that Moscow has used to try to keep other countries out of NATO and the EU. Fortunately, the EU and NATO recognized early on the objective of Moscow's border policy, and they went ahead with integrating these countries into European institutions. I still don't think that Moscow recognizes the failure of its border policies. Territory is more of a psychological issue with Russians than it is in most other countries.

Q: Were they duplicating the French and the Germans of their special agricultural policy?

SMITH: No, they couldn't afford to do that. There was always pressure from the farmers to provide EU-type price supports, but the country couldn't afford it. Price supports and subsidies are generally greater in wealthier countries, such as the EU, Japan, Norway and the United States. Some agriculture supports have come with EU membership. The booming construction industry absorbed many people who left farming. The construction industry is a big one. You see a lot of people who come into the Vilnius area during the week, and then they go back to the villages on the weekend. Presumably their wife and maybe some of the children are working the farm. Lithuanian agriculture was not highly profitable and was not usually a full time occupation

for the men. Right now, Lithuania's economy is growing at about seven percent a year. Nevertheless, problems inherited from the Soviet era, such as corruption, still plague the country. Once Lithuania is a member of the EU, many well-trained young people will leave for better jobs in the West. Immigration can turn into a real problem for the poor countries in the EU.

The hope is that joining the EU will bring more governmental and business transparency. I believe that it will help in some areas, but not in others. And this is where I think the economic ties with Russia can be advantageous and disadvantageous. A lot of money flows in from Russia, but business there operates in a very nontransparent manner. Russian business has generally reinforced the corrupt practices that traditionally operated in the country. I just returned from a trip to Estonia, Latvia and Ukraine and it is obvious that their energy industries are less transparent because of their connections with Russia.

Q: Is there a Baltic feeling as a separate thing, or you feel the states are kind of at the time you were there each kind of doing its own thing?

SMITH: To some extent they were still holding together in the 1990s because they knew that a unified approach would improve their chances of membership in NATO and the EU. In dealings with the Russians, the Baltic States had enough similar interests to want to stay together. In the pre-independence period you had the famous human chain, where people linked hands all the way along the Baltic coast to appeal for independence. It had the desired political effect in Europe and in Russia. Now that these countries are in both the EU and NATO. As a result, we will find the development of the three countries diverging. They will want to be treated more as individual countries rather than as a bloc. Everyone in the U.S. and Europe starts off by saying that each Baltic state is very different from the other. In the next sentence they lump all three states together. I'm certainly guilty of this. Estonians feel weaker ties to the other Baltic ties than do Latvia and Lithuania.

There's a bit of arrogance in the attitude of some Estonians. They believe that they are more sophisticated and closer to European culture than the others. There is a tendency by Estonians to consider themselves Nordics, rather than Baltic. Former Estonian Foreign Minister Tom Ilves caused some wounded feelings in Latvia and Lithuania when he said, "We're really not Baltics, we are Nordics." On the whole, the three Baltic States still work well together. Their foreign ministers meet about three or four times a year, the prime ministers get together on a regular basis as do the economy, industry, agricultural and interior ministers. The EU is helping build the "via Baltica" roadway which will better link the three countries. At present, there is no train service between the major capitals. You have to go to Moscow to go from one Baltic capital to the other by train. I've even taken the train from Moscow to the Baltics and I had to go directly to Riga. New issues will arise as they become more integrated into the EU. The Estonians are less interested in agricultural issues; they're more focused on monetary union. The Latvians are somewhere in the middle, but maritime issues are more important to them.

Moscow sees the Latvians as the weak link in the Baltic chain, and they put much more political pressure on Latvia than they do on the others. The Estonians just tell the Russians to go to hell

and get away with it. The Lithuanians have more latitude, since they have a smaller ethnic Russian population and are less important to Russia except as a corridor to move people and goods from Kaliningrad to the mainland. And so the Lithuanians have a somewhat more leverage with Moscow. When Lithuania was entering the EU, the Russians demanded sovereignty over a corridor running between Belarus and Kaliningrad. Of course the Lithuanians said no to this grab for their sovereign territory. Eventually, a special sealed train was agreed to that would shuttle Russians, including military personnel, between Kaliningrad and Belarus. The shocking thing to me was that the EU was willing to grant Russia control over Lithuanian territory. Only Lithuania's strong objections prevented it.

Q: You were there from '97 to 2000. Was the attitude wait till we get into the EU and NATO and then this is really going to keep us out of the Russian claws?

SMITH: To some extent. I was in Estonia and Latvia a week before they became members of the EU, and just after they became members of NATO. There was a feeling of relief in those countries; a feeling that they now have hard security through Article Five of the NATO Charter, and soft security through being members of the EU. It does provide them more security against Russian pressure than they would have otherwise, but perhaps not as much as they might think it does. Right now Russia is not in a mood to try to push aggressively against the Baltic States except through the threat to withhold energy exports if Russian control over key energy facilities is not allowed. Other than energy, Moscow doesn't have any way of really forcing its will on the Baltic States. Russia continues to pressure Latvia and Estonia on ethnic minority issues. Moscow repeatedly claims that the human rights of the ethnic Russians are being violated. This is primarily an issue of domestic politics in Russia, but it does keep suspicion high regarding Russian intentions in the region. The claims are more important to the people in Russia than it is to the ethnic Russians in the Baltic States. I've even had prominent ethnic Russians in Latvia tell me that the problems are exaggerated by Moscow, but that pressure from the Kremlin is useful to gain more privileges in the Baltic States. They were clearly in a privileged position before the collapse of the Soviet Union and many have a hard time dealing with the fact that they now have to compete for jobs, education and apartments with Latvians and Estonians. Most ethnic Russians in the Baltic States are proud to be the first (and maybe last) Euro-Russians.

Q: I imagine they certainly would feel better off than if they were back in the Russian embrace.

SMITH: They could go back and live in Russia anytime they want. But they don't want to. I talked to a Russian in Latvia recently, actually just a few weeks ago. He said that when he goes to Russia they treat him like he's not really Russian and they warned him about trying to appear better than them. He is uncomfortable there. He more Baltic than Russian now.

LAWRENCE P. TAYLOR
Ambassador
Latvia (1995-1997)

Lawrence P. Taylor was born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1940. He graduated in 1963 from the University of Ohio with a degree in history and economics and received his MA from American University. He served as a member of the Peace Corps in the province of Antioquia in 1963. In addition to Colombia, he was posted to Yugoslavia, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, Canada, England, and Estonia.

TAYLOR: You know, I was ambassador in Estonia, and I can still look at the documents in which the Russians said, "Well, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, they'll never be independent; they're too small to be independent; they can't afford to go it alone." Well, they're doing much better than Russia, thank you very much - much, much better.

Q: I would have thought that particularly the Baltic countries, because there are a good number of Baltic people whose family came from there, this would be one of those domains like Ireland your name has to be Kennedy or O'Brien to get it. Was this a consideration or was this part of the political process? Did you sort of fall through the cracks?

TAYLOR: No, you know it may turn out that the Baltic States become that in the future, but they're certainly not that now, and the Estonian-American community at least, and I don't want to speak for Latvian- or Lithuanian-Americans, but the Estonian-American community very much wants a professional, a career officer in Estonia because they know that the freedom of Estonia is a fragile thing. It's not something to be taken for granted, and the job of building and shaping a future in that region in which Estonia and the others can prosper and remain free and remain independent of Russia is something that they think is best served at this time by a succession of career ambassadors.

Q: What about the people, particularly the high proportion of Russians versus native Estonians and all that? How does that work out?

TAYLOR: Well, Estonians are surprisingly introverted and almost passive, which is a bit of a shame because inside they have so much beauty and grace and skill but they hide it, and it's a little bit off-putting to people who don't understand that it is there and it is being hidden for cultural reasons. About 30 percent of the country is ethnic Russian. You pointed that out in your question. That constitutes one of the really critical issues in the region, not just within Estonia, because how that situation is dealt with in social, economic, political, and cultural terms could be critical to the evolution of the entire region, and there are a great many problems in all of those areas that need stronger leadership and more involvement by Estonia. But I also want to mention that it is more than a national issue; it is an international issue, in the sense that - in my view, although I want to flag that it is not the view of all my colleagues in Washington, but it is my view - portions of the society in Russia try to use and to manipulate the presence of ethnic colleagues in Estonia and Latvia for their own foreign policy purposes in much the same way that the Germans did in the 1930s with the Sudeten Germans and the Danzig Corridor and so forth. That is, they care not a whit about the actual conditions or trying to ameliorate or improve

them; they simply want to use the fact of their presence in order to try to justify and legitimize a reach into Estonian sovereignty, both to pressure Estonian authorities on other issues (basically security and foreign policy issues) and also to confuse the West about whether Estonia and Latvia are countries that you can really trust. Are these the kind of countries that you really want to bring in to your clubs and organizations? Or aren't they a little risky? Aren't they a little problematic? Aren't they human rights abusers? And so the foreign policy dimension of this issue was one of the things that I worked most consistently on during my time in Tallinn, and of course, the Embassy, and myself included, traveled extensively to the areas where the ethnic Russians live in greatest numbers, both to stay on top of developments, but also to establish networks of contacts with them and their communities and organizations, and to be sure that they understood that we represented the United States to them as well. One of the things that I insisted on as ambassador, for example, was that agencies that have programs whose purpose was to operate in Estonia, had to operate in the ethnic Russian areas of Estonia, too. I insisted we have Peace Corps volunteers in Narva and in Sillamäe and in Kohtla-Järve and in these northeast cities and villages and communities, because we weren't just going to have those programs for Estonians. They were operating in Estonia, and we were going to have them for all the people that lived in Estonia.

Q: Were you having problems with the Estonian community in the United States on this?

TAYLOR: No, not at all. The Estonian community in the United States greatly supported my efforts on this. That's what they wanted to see. What bothers the Estonian community in the United States is that sometimes they feel that Washington believes what Moscow is saying about the treatment of ethnic colleagues, and that's their concern, that somehow, out of either ignorance or out of a desire to get along with Russia, Washington will turn a blind eye to the reality of the situation in Estonia and Latvia and sort of will let Russia get away with using these ethnic colleagues as a foreign policy lever on the Baltic States.

Q: What about the borders of Estonia with Latvia and Russia? Are these pretty well established?

TAYLOR: With Latvia it was very well established. With Russia it's still not. Trying to nurture a border agreement between Estonia and Russia was part of one of these priorities, this reorientation toward positive engagement. When I arrived there the Estonian negotiating position was that Russia must recognize that the Estonian state began with the Treaty of Tartu in the 1920s, as part of the border settlement. They weren't interested in changing the actual physical border, but they wanted the agreement to contain a legitimization of their birth certificate in the 1920s. The Russians were unwilling to do that. The Russians still argue that the incorporation of the Baltic States into the Soviet Union in the 1940s was a legitimate act and not an illegitimate act, and they did not want to date the legitimacy of the current political systems from the 1920s. Now over time, and with the encouragement of the United States government, the Estonians dropped their demand about the Treaty of Tartu, but that proved to be insufficient to bring Russia to signing the agreement, even though Russia had been saying all along that that was the reason that they would not sign. But the Estonians got to the point where they simply surrendered. They surprisingly went to a meeting, surprisingly to the Russians (they had worked it out with us), and

said we agree to all your positions, so let's sign. It wasn't good enough; it still hasn't been signed. The Russians decided there were other problems.

Q: Well, in the Baltic States, what's the pecking order between Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia as far as success and all, and be objective?

TAYLOR: Well, you know, these are three very different countries, and that is an issue in and of itself because we call them the Baltic States, and I think politically in the United States they're more powerful when they go under that umbrella, but in reality, they are three different languages, three different cultures, different religions, different histories, different values. They don't have very much in common except geography. Now I don't think there's any doubt that Estonia is significantly ahead on the economic front, and its selection as potential first-wave entry into EU enlargement is an indication that that judgment is widely shared. Estonian leadership "seized the moment" in 1992-1993 and made remarkable policy reforms and initiatives on the economic front. Beyond that, I wouldn't know how to rate them. I suspect that, in a military sense, for example, Estonia might be the least of those three capable of contributing significantly to, say, NATO or an international security system. So there's a lot of different standards and different measures, but in the kind of the classical economic measures, I think it's pretty clear that Estonia has gone out ahead. But Latvia and Lithuania are catching up now.

Q: What about the Holocaust? I used to be a refugee relief officer and dealt with people coming out of camps around, and if I recall, the Estonians were actually - all the Baltic States - the ethnic ones there ran some of the nastiest camps, particularly against the Jews but with others. Was this something that you got involved in?

TAYLOR: Sure. As you can see by recent news accounts of developments in Latvia, history weighs heavily on all of these societies, and the World War II experience is something that weighs extremely heavily. People try to reinvent it; they try to forget it; they try to distort it. The best that can be said is that of a lot of Estonians, they will legitimately say that history dealt them a cruel hand, that if you wanted to fight for Estonia, you either had to fight for Stalin or you had to fight for Hitler. There wasn't any other choice. Or you could run away and not fight, but that was your choice, and once you did that you were trapped in a system that was doing a lot of other things that may or may not have been to your liking. The worst that can be said is just what you said: that there were an awful lot of willing accomplices to the worst aspects of both the Soviet and the Nazi systems. Now Estonia had a very small pre-war Jewish population, unlike Lithuania and Latvia. There were only about 10,000 Jews in Estonia prior to the war, and they were relatively well integrated by standards, but they were exterminated, either there in Estonia or sent somewhere else. There were, then, a couple of camps. The Nazis established a couple of camps in Estonia in which Jews from other parts of Europe were brought in and exterminated. The Russians built a monument out near Paldiski, about 40 minutes outside of Tallinn, at one of those camps, and a new monument was raised in 1994-95 by the newly independent Estonian government to the same thing. There's still a small Jewish community in Estonia now, a few hundred people. We had good relations with it, and we had good relations with international American Jewish groups who were concerned about the legacy of World War II and how

countries were treating issues associated with restitution and property and so forth. But there's no doubt that horrible things happened in Estonia as they happened elsewhere and that, although people would like to forget it and blame it all on Nazis or Germans, Nazis and Germans had a lot of willing collaborators in Estonia as elsewhere.

Q: Was there the equivalent of a Baltic League of American ambassadors with the Latvian, Lithuanian men or women in those places? Did you get together much?

TAYLOR: Yes, the three of us got together about three times a year, and then a wider ring, including our colleagues from Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, got together about once a year.

Q: Did you find this useful?

TAYLOR: It's essential. In fact, we should have done more of it. In part, I'll tell you - again, I don't want to be overly critical - but this sort of thing helped compensate for the lack of interest and leadership from Washington on these issues. You just had to have somebody occasionally at that level to talk to and to sort through some of these issues, especially issues that were regional and international in their effects. And so these meetings were very helpful, and then particularly with my colleague, the U.S. ambassador in Latvia, but also in Lithuania, we were on the phone an awful lot to each other discussing things, and there were some issues that were of such importance, we thought, that we would draft one cable and send it in from all three of us - it would come from all three of us - in an effort to give it greater weight and greater power in the system.

End of reader