Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

LESLIE GERSON

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INTERVIEW

Q: Maybe you could tell us exactly when and where you were born and a few words about your family.

GERSON: Well, I was born August 25, 1948, in Chicago, Illinois, but I am a Californian. I always resented it when my statistic was used by the State Department to show how people chose favorable states for their home leave when in fact they were really from somewhere else, because my parents were in Chicago for business when I was born. My father needed to close and sell a store there. I was born incidental to that business trip. So I consider myself a native Californian. I'm in fact a Valley Girl, from before Valley Girls were invented, I think.

Q: You and my wife, Stephanie. And right actually downtown Chicago?

GERSON: Yes, Michael Reese Hospital. My mother told me that it was an extremely hot day, August, and that she could smell the stockyards from the open hospital windows, because there was no air conditioning. So that's all I know about it. I've never seen the hospital. I've only been back to Chicago three times since then, twice for work.

Q: And your father was there selling a store. What was his business?

GERSON: My dad was a pharmacist. He was the second youngest of 10 children, eight of whom for certain were born in what is now Belarus. It's kind of unclear where he was born, although he finally was in possession, later in life, of a certificate of presumptive

birth in the city of Cleveland. Around the time of prohibition, pharmacies began to add soda fountains, where people could get an ice cream sundae or a soft drink, and gradually my father moved into restaurant management with a gentleman who was coming out of prohibition type enterprises. That businessman wanted to move into something more mainstream. So my father was selling, I believe, a drug store-coffee shop-soda fountain in a hotel in Chicago at the time I was born.

Q: Just to digress a little bit, this is very interesting to me because my grandfather was a pharmacist in Chicago, presumably at about the same time.

GERSON: There we go. They may have known each other.

Just as an aside, my father was Maurice (pronounced Morris) Gerson. The gentleman with whom he went into the drugstore/coffee shop business was a man called Milton F. Kreis, who owned, eventually, the drug store/coffee shop in the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Beverly Hills, where many movie stars, in the heyday of Hollywood, were discovered. The third person in their group of three bachelors or soon to be young married men was Charlie Wick, future head of the United States Information Agency in the Reagan Administration.

Q: Very interesting. So he had had a store in Chicago but eventually moved to California?

GERSON: In fact, the business had already moved to the West Coast. This was a residual store left in the Midwest. Most of the others in the Midwest had already been closed. In fact, I remember, even when I was young, my father had to go to Dayton to sell that store. They still were moving from east to west, but the Midwestern stores hadn't all been sold yet and apparently that was how I came to be born in Chicago, although my parents already resided in California.

Q: Now he was an immigrant from Belarus?

GERSON: His family was.

Q: But he'd been in the United States for longer?

GERSON: He never had a birth record. Like many Jewish immigrant families, there were no birth records for anyone. He never knew his exact date of birth. It was calculated because people in the family remembered that he was born approximately x number of days before Rosh Hashanah, and in fact the year of his birth wasn't even really clear. At some point, I think when he was starting school, somebody had to choose a year of birth for him and they chose 1902, although it was possible he was born in 1901, and the actual day chosen for his birth is almost certainly not his real date of birth.

Q: Very interesting. And your mother?

GERSON: My mother was from the west side of Cleveland, my dad from the east side, which was a huge gulf in those days. You usually didn't marry across those ethnic and geographic lines. My father was from a family of Jewish immigrants and my mother was a Roman Catholic, also from a family with 10 children.

She was of German heritage. The adults spoke German at home, mainly so that the children wouldn't understand. That would have been maybe her grandfather who came from Germany, not her mother.

Q: And they met, then, in Cleveland and married in Cleveland?

GERSON: No, they married in California, in fact. My father made a career, allegedly, of dating girls who were already engaged. He was dating my mother's older sister, or trying to date her. She was engaged to her eventual husband at the time and in the course of going out with the older sister, Marcella, Marty, he met my mother, who was only 16 or 17 years old at the time, and he was 15 to 16 years older and he just thought she was the cat's meow. He tried giving her gifts and tried to go out with her, but she thought he was definitely too old for her. Eventually, after my mother had joined the WAVES during World War II and so forth, and they had gone their separate ways, they reconnected, somehow always staying in touch and eventually married in California, in Santa Barbara.

It was a little bit of a difficult process because my father had been married before. Somehow in that hiatus of 12 years he married and divorced. There was also the hurdle of a Jewish-Catholic marriage. They didn't know exactly how to go about getting married.

So my uncle-in-law by marriage, who was a priest, advised my mother that the best thing to do was go to a justice of the peace, get married, have children, put those children in parochial school and then go to the priest and say, "We've got a problem. We're not really married in the Church." That's exactly what they did. I can remember, I was either in first or second grade when my parents were "married" in the Church. So there we go.

Q: Well, a good background, there.

GERSON: I think that prepared me for being a consular officer, realizing that there's always ways to accomplish things that seem insurmountable.

Q: And funny family situations.

GERSON: That's right.

Q: Brothers and sisters as well?

GERSON: I have one brother, who's almost three years younger than I am and a perfect bone marrow match, which became important later in life. I always knew he'd be good for something! And later, when I was in high school and then in college, my parents also sponsored two French girls to live with us, one in an organized manner through the

National Catholic Welfare Conference and the second kind of in a more random manner through the first one, and I always considered those my sisters. So I often talk about my sisters, but in fact they're not really my sisters.

Q: But they lived with you for quite some time?

GERSON: One for a year and the other for a little longer. Instead of being just friends, somehow we developed an extremely sisterly relationship, and, in fact, I will be going to the one hundredth birthday party this June of my French "mother", the real mother of one of the two sisters. I've become like a real member of both of their families.

Q: That's great! So you went to school in the San Fernando Valley?

GERSON: That's correct, parochial school, through 12th grade.

Q: In which town?

GERSON: My high school, which was probably most important for me, was Louisville High School in Woodland Hills. It's a girls school on Mulholland Drive.

Q: So it was Catholic school? And as the reputation of Catholic schools, nuns, strict, rulers?

GERSON: No, they were from Ireland, they were excellent. I'm still involved with the school today, through alumni programs and everything. It's a fabulous school, absolutely fabulous, and many of us are still in touch because of the school. So I have nothing bad to say about that school, only really fine things.

Q: A girls school?

GERSON: Girls school.

Q: That's great! And what did you find yourself interested in in school?

GERSON: My entire goal and aspiration as a young person was to be a teacher. After high school I went to UC Santa Barbara, and after my B.A. I did my fifth, teacher training year at UCLA. I then went back to teach at my old high school, by happenstance. I happened to go there to speak at a parent-teacher event, trying to drum up interest in a summer trip to Europe that the school sponsored every other summer. I had gone on the European trip when I was in high school and at the end of my speech and slide show the principal came up and said, "Would you like to teach here?" I thought, "Well, I know it's not going to pay very much, but rather than go through all the hassle of trying to find the right job in the right public school in LA, why not?"

So I taught there. I dreamed of being a teacher, I trained to be a teacher, and I became a teacher.

Q: We've leaped ahead a little bit. You said that in high school you went overseas?

GERSON: That was my first trip abroad. Because the nuns were Irish, Aer Lingus would give two of those nuns a free trip home if they could get 30 students together for a trip to Europe. So there was a five-six-week trip to Europe offered after my junior year. I was the third year of students at this school. It was a new school. So when I started as a freshman there were no seniors. So the first trip had been two years earlier. Then the year came for my grade and my parents made the sacrifice. I remember my mother saying they'd never been to Europe and they probably never would go, but what a good price and I would be taken care of and this would be a great opportunity. And I also thought that this was probably the only time I'd ever go abroad. I was quite wrong as it turned out.

Q: This was just a trip to Ireland?

GERSON: No, Ireland, France, England, Switzerland, Austria, Italy, where I passed out in St. Peter's during an audience with the pope and had to be resuscitated by a Swiss Guard, the whole thing.

Q: You passed out from being overwhelmed from that?

GERSON: No, I don't like crowds and it was very hard to breathe and standing a long time, waiting...I just dissolved.

Q: An audience with the pope?

GERSON: One of these giant audiences. Nothing like only your group is going to see the pope, and that was the problem. We were waiting with these masses of people for a couple of hours, standing, blood rushes out of your head, you're wearing a school uniform, replete with blazer, in the summer. I think I'm the only person in our group who got to see the inside of the Swiss Guards' infirmary. And they gave me brandy to revive me and I was so upset, because at confirmation I had taken the oath that I wouldn't drink until I was 21. I felt somehow like a sinner.

Q: Were these guards in their Michelangelo uniforms?

GERSON: Right.

Q: Wonderful! So, at home, meanwhile, did you find yourself interested in foreign affairs? You had a father and mother who both came from recent immigrant backgrounds.

GERSON: Not at all, other than that I always listened to the news. We weren't allowed to watch a lot of TV at home. The one thing we were allowed to watch was the news. I remember on one occasion in high school the administration surprised our class with a

standardized test about current events and it was just kind of an experiment and people did miserably, but I think I only missed three out of a hundred questions or something. I remember that the teachers were kind of shocked and I was sort of pleased. So obviously I had heard a lot about current events through TV discussions, but I never thought of the Foreign Service as a career. I just wouldn't have known how you went about joining the diplomatic corps. In California, you were more riveted on the Beatles and movie stars.

Q: The Beach Boys, in California, presumably.

GERSON: When I went to college I didn't major in political science or anything like that.

Q: You chose to go to college close to home.

GERSON: Well, there was no question, I had to go to a state college. At that time the University of California was pretty affordable. My parents agreed that it would be great to live away. I didn't have a car or anything, so Santa Barbara was about an hour and fifteen minutes away. I could take the Greyhound. It was great and it was inexpensive.

Q: Had your parents also gone to college?

GERSON: Well, my father did his pharmacy training, which I assume was college. His brothers (being so young, he had two much older brothers and the rest were sisters) basically all helped and made sure that he, practically the youngest and the youngest boy, could be educated. He was a licensed pharmacist. So, yes, he had gone to college. I don't know whether it was a four-year program, I don't know what it was in the old days.

My mother had taken some courses at a local college in Cleveland when she was already working as a secretary.

Q: Had you already taken languages in high school?

GERSON: Yes, I was forced to take French and Latin. I had wanted to take Spanish but the school said no, because they tracked students in those days. So if I had taken Spanish I would have been in the less advanced English, the less advanced math, the less advanced history classes. So of course I didn't want to be with the less advanced classes, so I agreed to take French and it frankly changed my whole life. It was one of those serendipitous moments.

Q: Because in California you would think that Spanish would have been the thing to take.

GERSON: But these nuns were from Ireland and French was considered more difficult. Now, in fact, as you know, I speak Spanish at home. So the Spanish came later.

Q: And the French presumably helped when you had the French girls staying with you as well.

GERSON: Although we spoke exclusively English when they were in California, although now I speak French with both of them. We sort of changed after I went to university in France.

Q: So you went to UC Santa Barbara for four years?

GERSON: Well, three years, because one of the years, still at UC Santa Barbara but Santa Barbara is the head of the education abroad program for the UC system and I competed to go to university in France for my junior year and I went to the University of Bordeaux. Still part of the UC program, but I went there for my third year.

Q: For the whole year? Was it an American program in Bordeaux or was it immersion into the normal French university?

GERSON: You had some classes, for example Survey of French Literature, which were for foreign students. But I did medieval history, which was the regular French university program. So it depended on which course you took. I took a Baudelaire course and that was the French program. You kind of mixed and you lived in the dormitories with other students, both French and international, and not just among your U.S. classmates.

Q: So it was pretty heavy French immersion. It wasn't a separate group of Americans.

GERSON: Absolutely not, except at the very beginning you went for six, seven weeks to Pau for intensive language training to get you ready. The year that I went to France was the fall after they had had the huge, what the French called *événements*, the 1968 riots. So school started late, in fact, so we were in Pau, as I recall, a little bit longer than we would usually have been for our immersion and preparation courses.

Q: And did you like that experience?

GERSON: I loved it. I was an extremely shy person, very shy. Never raised my hand, never spoke unless spoken to in class, not very confident at all. And somehow France was a change for me. I made a lot of friends and I became much more self-confident and outgoing.

Q: And you traveled around Europe a bit, I suppose?

GERSON: I did. I bought, I had ordered it already, before I left the U.S., a VW Beetle. My father would have given me any amount of money to buy a more stable, substantial car, but I had to have one of those VW Beetles and I picked it up, without knowing how to drive stick shift, in Paris, in rush hour, around October or November and drove it back to Bordeaux.

Q: Somebody must have taught you how.

GERSON: I went with a friend who, as we were pulling out of the garage, after I paid a

fortune in insurance, said, "Shift! First! Shift! Second!" That's the way we lurched out of Paris.

With that I drove around a lot and then my mother came over to Europe for the first time ever the summer after I finished my program and we drove around Europe for three and a half months in that VW Beetle. And then it came back with me and remained with me for 26 years until I was DCM in Geneva, when it was killed in a car accident. That car became quite the talk of the diplomatic town.

Q: So you finished the year in Bordeaux and went back and did your senior year? And you majored in what?

GERSON: French and English and I minored in history.

Q: And got your education degree at the same time?

GERSON: No, in California you have to have a fifth year for your education degree. So I left Santa Barbara and I went down to LA and lived at home and did my fifth year at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), did my student teaching, worked as well in the company where my father worked, doing some bookkeeping. So I did all those things at one time there in that fifth year.

Q: And then you would have graduated then, must have been about…?

GERSON: I graduated in '70 from Santa Barbara and then in '71 I finished my fifth year at UCLA and started working.

Q: That's the point at which you started at your old high school?

GERSON: Correct.

Q: How long did you keep that up?

GERSON: Three years. I taught English, I became English Department chairman in my second year. And I taught advanced French because there was no one else there who could at the time. And I was sort of the mentor or faculty member responsible for student government for a year or two. All the different activities that you have when you're a teacher.

Q: And you enjoyed teaching?

GERSON: Yes, very much.

Q: Are you still in touch with any of your students?

GERSON: Many. In fact I tried calling one last night who had sent me an email. She is

retired from an executive position with Bank of America and is now director of some program at another enterprise. It's incredible.

Q: Fun to have students who are retired?

GERSON: I think she's the only one retired, but I have maybe 10 who remain in touch with me regularly.

Q: How neat! Okay, three years and then what happened?

GERSON: Then I decided that I wanted to leave Los Angeles. I was still living in the same area where I grew up and for a variety of personal reasons I decided to move back to Santa Barbara. But there were at that time only three high schools in Santa Barbara, so I moved back there without a job and I worked for a temporary agency doing all sorts of things.

Q: Office work?

GERSON: Filing and you wouldn't believe. And somehow, I can't remember exactly the timing, I believe it was before I left LA, I went to lunch with a few friends from both undergraduate and graduate school, all women, four or five of us and at least two or three of them had taken the Foreign Service exam and had failed by maybe one or two points and they were talking about what a bear it was and they were recalling questions and I was being a smart aleck and I was saying, "That's obvious, that's x or that's y!" I became a little annoying and so they sort of dared me to take the Foreign Service exam.

So somehow between the time I that left LA and arrived in Santa Barbara to look for work I had become aware that there was a process to get into the State Department and I actually took the written exam in Santa Barbara at the university there.

Q: On a dare?

GERSON: On a dare and I almost walked out of it, because there were about 300 people there, milling around waiting for the testing room to open and of course you overhear things and I remember a guy saying, "Well, I get military preference," and then another one was an economics professor at the university and he was telling me that the exam was weighted very heavily on economics, which I had not studied at all at college. I had bought two economic textbooks in anticipation of the exam, thinking that I would read them before the exam, but when I opened the first chapter of the first one I realized that I wasn't going to learn economics on my own and I wasn't interested in it. So I thought, "Oh, gosh, only two people statistically out of this group are going to pass. What am I doing here?"

But then I saw a friend, our senior year we were in the same dorm corridor, we were quite good friends. We laughed and we said, "Okay, let's go for it and we'll go out to lunch afterwards." In fact she didn't stick it out, she left halfway through, as did a number of

people. So that's how and where I took the exam.

Q: Do you remember anything about the exam?

GERSON: I remember that the English portion was extremely easy for me, especially after having spent three years correcting papers and trying to get people to write succinctly and with the best language possible. I remember being very nervous when I was done and looked up and everyone else was still writing. There were many people when they called "Time" who had not even completed the exam and I had completed it maybe 15, 20 minutes before they did. It was embarrassing. I could have taken the test up and handed it in but I was embarrassed so I just sat there. At that time, in addition to the general knowledge and English language portions of the exam, which everyone took, we also took special portions of the exam for the cone we wanted to be in. The consular portion was, as I recall, very logical. General knowledge was like playing *Jeopardy* and it was my favorite TV show and I could usually whittle the questions down to a choice between two things and kind of reason the rest out.

Q: So you had to choose your cone in advance at that time?

GERSON: And you got a test segment based on that.

Q: On your cone, I seem to recall that's how it was.

GERSON: In addition to the other standard segments that everyone got.

Q: Why did you choose consular?

GERSON: Well, when I got the brochure about the State Department it was only type of work that to me made sense. I've never been interested in theories and analyzing. I've been interested in accomplishing something, helping people, seeing an outcome. The only other thing that would have been interesting to me would have been management or admin, as we called it in those days, except that that seemed to have a set of skills that people could learn in advance that I had never learned: mathematical skills or procurement skills or things like that. And consular just seemed interesting, because you'd be interacting with people all time.

Q: Okay, when you came out of the exam you felt pretty good about it?

GERSON: I had no idea. I felt pretty good, but I thought, "Well all of this could have been a trick and how many things did you just take an educated guess on?" And then a few weeks later I started to hear that people who had taken the exam were beginning to get rejection letters.

Q: This was some time later?

GERSON: Yes, I took it in September or something like that and it would have been

maybe January or something, rumors had it that people were beginning to get response letters in the mail.

Q: Even before this, you had taken this on a dare. Were you really interested in getting the job if it were offered to you?

GERSON: By then I had read more about the career and it seemed very interesting, but I was still looking for other jobs. I was, in fact, making plans to move to northern California, where my parents lived by then, where I had a line on better teaching options, because it was pretty obvious that in Santa Barbara I was just not going to get into teaching easily, because it was just a smaller community. And then one day I went to get my mail and a huge, big, fat package came from the State Department.

Q: And you knew from college days…

GERSON: I knew that if it was fat it wasn't just a Dear John letter. So I opened it and it talked about the next steps. I thought, "I'd better get serious about this."

The oral exam wasn't offered in Santa Barbara. San Francisco was the nearest place. So I signed up for an oral exam date. And I thought, "I've got to do something." I was essentially unemployed. Even though I wasn't collecting unemployment insurance, I was still living hand to mouth, and my father was sending me part of his Social Security check to make ends meet. But in preparation for the oral exam I bought a *Time* magazine every single week and I read it cover to cover, and I watched the *Today* show every morning for the current events and cultural discussions, and I still watched *Jeopardy* every night, and I got the third volume of Samuel Eliot Morison's history of the United States. I'd read the three volumes before in high school or college, but whenever you got to 20th century history in school you always ran out of time at the end of the school year and I felt less sure about more recent U.S. history than I did about our Founding Fathers. You spent a lot of time on the Civil War and the Revolution. I thought, "Well, let me read that last volume." I already had the book in my library, but I thought "Let me read that again." That was my preparation for the oral exam.

Q: So that was taking it seriously. And you took the oral, then,

GERSON: I'd already moved to San Francisco when I took the oral.

Q: What year are we in, now?

GERSON: We're in 1975, maybe in March or April or May, when I took the oral. That was the old system of the three on one oral exam. I had one man examiner and two women. It was the end of the day and the two women seemed very friendly. I can still remember their names. They were very friendly, and a lot of the situational questions were a lot of fun.

The big debate was what to wear, because my hair was extremely long, to my waist. My

mother thought that this Alice in Wonderland hair was not suitable for this exam/interview and what was I going to wear? I went and bought a suit, but it was a miniskirt, pale yellow with a flowery blouse, not at all professional and my mother said, "Why don't we put your hair in a bun or something like that?" I said, "Look, if they don't want me the way I am there's no point." So I remember going in looking like Alice in a mini skirt. I looked very young, anyway, so I probably still looked 15.

I felt very comfortable with the situational questions about "What would you do if a destitute came knocking at your door?" things like that. The man never said anything. He began making me a little nervous. Finally, he said, "Now, I have some questions for you." I said, "I figured you would." I don't know what gave me the guts to be a little bit saucy.

He said, "I'd like you to discuss the social, political and economic situation in the United States from Reconstruction to World War II." My first thought was, "I just read this." What I said to him was, "It's a little before my time but I'll try." He did not have a sense of humor at all so he just stared at me. I began to talk about things from the third volume of Samuel Eliot Morison. Finally he said, "Did we go to war at all during that time?" I thought, "*Jeopardy* last night, the category was '1898.'" And I said, "Yes, in 1898, the Spanish-American War" and he looked absolutely shocked and I was able to talk about everything that had been in that *Jeopardy* category of five or six questions. But if I hadn't watched *Jeopardy* the night before I would never have been able to answer so quickly, with even the date, which I think impressed him.

In those days they just made you go sit outside the exam room while they deliberated, and I could just hear the murmuring of voices. Then two of them left and one of them called me back in and said, "Well, there's weaknesses in your knowledge but you passed." So then I got seriously interested. They said there'd be maybe several months before I was called because I'd traveled overseas and lived in Bordeaux which could complicate the background check. But, in fact, a couple of months later they called and offered me a slot in an A-100 training class.

Q: So a very quick security clearance and medical clearance and so forth.

GERSON: Because I came into the class on September 25, 1975 and I had taken the oral exam in the spring. I knew a couple of months before the entry class began so it was really quite quick.

Q: So September '75 you joined in what class?

GERSON: I have no idea. You know I joined twice. That's the only time I did A-100 and I'm still in touch with many people from that class.

Q: When you visit FSI, they have all the group photos and you never can find your own if you don't know what class.

GERSON: I can never remember the number. I never remember the number of my Senior Seminar class either.

Q: Okay, but you started. What do you remember about your entering class? How many of you were there?

GERSON: There were 33, 11 were women. The first day, when we stood up and introduced ourselves, some of us were like fish out of water. I remember as we went around town, Washington, DC, people would say, "There's Congressman whatever" and I'm saying to myself, "If it's not a movie star, I don't know who it is." I felt very much like they'd made the wrong choice in selecting me, when people were recounting, in their introductions, about all that they'd done and so many people were from the East Coast and had had DC experience. But there was a woman who was a blackjack dealer before. There was a guy who had been a minor league baseball player and whose hair was very long and he was very worried about finding an assignment where he wouldn't have to cut his hair. I just saw him the other day. He was the first ambassador out of our class. So you never know!

So it was kind of interesting. Very few are still in today. I just retired. Very few were still left on active duty when I retired, not even a handful. But it was a good class.

Q: Back at that time, was the training, which I guess was probably about six weeks, really very relaxed and more focused on team building and introduction to the Foreign Service, or was it intensive?

GERSON: No, it was crammed full of information, as I recall, what the State Department does and other government agencies and things like that. There were four of us, particularly three of us, who occasionally cut afternoon lectures and rushed over to the Watergate Pastry Shop and get a pastry.

Q: Shame on you! The Watergate shop, that's on the other side of the river.

GERSON: We were, of course, in Rosslyn. But training was pretty structured. You dressed, as I recall, every day, properly.

Q: And then, at the end of the course, you got your assignment?

GERSON: Oh, no. That was quite a trial, done a little bit differently from how they do it now.

Q: How did that work?

GERSON: Well, when they gave the class the list of the different possible assignments I immediately saw Dakar, Senegal. Now one thing I omitted to tell you is I thought I would just join for two years. I would go to Africa and then go back to teaching, because there was this whole dare thing, so I didn't want to tell anybody that, but I saw Dakar, Senegal,

I already spoke French and went for it and I immediately got it.

So that was easy. I got all my shots, typhoid, rabies, the whole works, and then the job fell through and of course all the other jobs had been taken. It was just before Christmas. I didn't know what to do. They said, "Why don't you go home for Christmas?" So I actually went home my first Christmas. I hadn't even gone anywhere yet.

Dan Welter, who was my Career Development Officer, said to me, "There's a job in London we haven't advertised." I said, "I don't want to go to London." I didn't want to say why I didn't want to go to London. It was because if I was only going to stay two years I didn't want to go somewhere I had already been and probably would go back to. I wanted to go to Africa. My brother and I both had always been fascinated with Africa.

So Dan said, "Well, let me see." The State Department was just introducing the rotational program, where you would do one year in one cone and a second year in another. And he said, "I'll need to contact some posts in Africa and see if there are some where rotational positions are going to be established."

So I went home for Christmas. I came back. Still nothing concrete, but Dan told me that there were two potentials: one Addis Ababa, the second Nairobi. He said, "I don't recommend you go to Addis. There are going to be a lot of political problems and for your first tour I think you need somewhere where you can at least go out and have a Foreign Service experience."

Nairobi was fighting taking a rotational junior officer, because they were going to lose a regular political officer position, as I understood it, and they didn't want to do that. So time was dragging on. Other people were in language training. I wasn't in language training, because what language would I train in?

So I drew a line in the sand and I said, "Look, if by x date Nairobi hasn't said yes, in the morning, I will go to London." That day came and Nairobi hadn't said yes and I called up Dan and I said, "I will go to London." Three o'clock that afternoon he calls me up and said, "Nairobi has just said yes."

I said, "I drew a line in the sand. There's got to be a reason. I will go to London." Someone else from the class whose job had also fallen through went to Nairobi and they had a really rough time there.

Of course what I didn't realize is that London at that time was the greatest place to learn consular skills, because of course there was no visa waiver, you had the whole world applying there, the whole Indian subcontinent, Nigeria, Filipinos, and London had great consular managers. So it was a superb place to learn the consular function. And of course since it turned out not to be the only two years I spent in the Foreign Service, it was an excellent decision.

Q: So it was a consular slot, of course?

GERSON: It was, straight consular.

Q: Big consular section in London?

GERSON: It was huge, huge at the time.

Q: And you were on the non-immigrant visa line?

GERSON: We rotated. I started in non-immigrant visas (NIV), then I went to immigrant visas (IV). I wasn't supposed to but that was another story and then did special consular services, where I had a reputation as the person who dealt with all the clients with mental or emotional issues. I seemed to have a great affinity for those cases or they had great confidence in me.

Q: American loonies?

GERSON: Yes, Americans. But it was an excellent job.

Q: Now, you said people from all over the world were applying in London. Wasn't standard practice to tell them, "You have to go back and apply in Bombay" or something?

GERSON: This was the Commonwealth and a lot of the applicants lived there, were recent immigrants. So Indians and Pakistanis, Jamaicans, Nigerians, who were all studying, working or living in London, although there were the odd people who came through who were visiting other family members, but most of the visa applicants were resident or temporarily resident in England. And then there were the ones who just happened to pop up there as well.

Q: You have a lot of fraud?

GERSON: There was a big fraud while I was there, involving malfeasance, actually. I only learned about it afterwards, because the investigation was done very quietly and I was a brand new officer.

In retrospect, we were all advised of it later, it was learned that Jamaicans were somehow very easily getting visas there, Jamaicans who were just coming in to the country for that purpose, perhaps. We had some Jamaican employees as well, so apparently immediately suspicion went to those people. In fact, that was not at all the vulnerability. Our NIV line boss, a gentleman called Bernie Fennell, ran the investigation. Eventually it was discovered that a Frenchwoman, married to a British security officer at the airport, who had been there for years, her name was Josie, I can't remember her last name, was the person who was bringing in these Jamaican passports and running them through the visa process. Of course we didn't have any of the controls we have now and getting them stamped and taking them out of the embassy was not hard.

One Jamaican employee, who was young then, whom people might originally, I'm not speaking from knowledge, but who the supervisors might originally have thought to be involved, is now the senior FSN (Foreign Service national) there and has been a person above reproach and absolutely invaluable. But Bernie Fennell himself, my first line boss, was several years later himself arrested for malfeasance when he was in Madrid.

Q: In fact he was with me at my very first post, also, in Fiji, where there were just four Americans, so I got to know him very well. So there was actually fraud right within the consular section and you didn't hear about it until later?

GERSON: Well, it would have been inappropriate, when you're still investigating something and you don't know who's perpetrating the fraud, to be sharing details about the investigation. It was one of those things that after it was over we were all debriefed. And I would say that with the exception, I don't want to overstate, of Canada, every place that I have served in the consular section, there has been some fraud either during, immediately before or immediately after my tenure there, from something as simple as waiting room guards selling places to officers selling visas.

Q: How interesting. When I asked the question I had more in mind whether the visa applicants were trying to perpetrate fraud than whether the Americans were involved.

GERSON: There's that as well, but that's sort of a simple fraud where you present a fraudulent document in order to try to qualify for a visa. In Haiti, for example, the interviewing officers often got ink on their hands because the documents had been so recently printed. But that's easier to detect and I consider that fraud part of what we're trained to detect. I'm sure that existed in many places, but I'm talking about internal fraud.

Q: What was the refusal rate you had there?

GERSON: Quite low, all in all, because, remember, even British people were getting visas. There was no visa waiver at that time. The visa waiver program was introduced much later. Most of the applications actually came in through the mail. Huge boxes of mail-in passports would be stacked on rolling carts and after you'd done your personal interviews you would sit down and take these boxes and boxes full of passports back to your desk for processing. Most of the cases were easily issuable.

Q: And then most of them would not even have interviews, I suspect.

GERSON: Correct. British citizens came to get an interview if they were in a hurry, they didn't trust the mail, they'd already been denied by mail or had been asked to come in for interview for closer assessment, or they weren't British residents.

Q: Was this a high pressure kind of visa line?

GERSON: Very much so. Then we sat at regular teller windows with no glass or anything like that, but the demand was constant. You rotated on the line. There were enough officers that you would have to interview from 8:00 – 10:00 a.m. or from 9:00 – 12:00. So you didn't have to interview all day long, because you also had these massive amounts of boxes that had to be dealt with.

Q: Okay, that was the NIV. And the IV, there must have been lots of those as well.

GERSON: There were and when I was in that unit there was a change in the law affecting medical doctors and their immigration status. The new law was going to cut off a special immigration entitlement for medical doctors worldwide that December, even those who had registered for immigration many years earlier but who had not yet immigrated. In order to take advantage of their pending immigrant applications, they had to process their cases to conclusion by a certain date that was only a few weeks away. So what we did is, and of course there were no computers, we went through these huge revolving file drawers with three by five cards for each pending immigrant and pulled out every doctor case we could find. We then contacted these doctors, advised them of the change in the regulations and the need to process their immigrant visas right away if they were still interested, and for weeks we did nothing but interview doctors. And not the families. All you wanted was the doctor. And they had to be on a plane, they had to have landed in the U.S. by a certain time. It was the most incredible process.

You felt like you were on a mission. We would work until 9:00 or 10:00 at night. We would print the visas as rapidly as we could and the people were so thankful. Many of these people hadn't even an intention to immigrate right then and there, but when they realized that they were going to be cut off on a certain date they just all flooded in. We caught doctors with TB (tuberculosis), luckily, just a couple of days of medication and you can get that under control. People were so grateful for the outreach that we did to try to get them to the U.S. and preserve their options for future work.

Q: How unusual to do that. I wonder if there would be any thought of anything like that today, all that extra work.

GERSON: There was one case, the plane had to put down in Iceland in bad weather and the doctor missed the arrival deadline, and we had to appeal and we got him in. I became friendly with many of these people afterwards, because once they entered the U.S. they had to come back to England. They didn't have jobs yet in the U.S. I can't remember what the exact change in the regulations was but the doctors just needed to get to the U.S., enter on their immigrant visas so then they could come back home, make their plans, try to locate work, get their families and homes sold. Probably some of them never actually went back to the U.S. after thinking about it calmly, but at least it preserved their option.

Q: And what did the British think about us sucking all their doctors away?

GERSON: These people had all applied to immigrate anyway. But it was an incredible

thing.

Q: And special consular services? Any special loonies spring to mind all these years later?

GERSON: All I can remember is that I was there during the year that Freddie Laker started his very cheap flights to London and, my gosh, everybody and their uncle could get there. I remember a woman who came running in one day, she had recorded the voices of the people that were pursuing her and she said she had to get to Buckingham Palace to warn Prince Charles and Jane Austen was going to kill her and they were keeping her prisoner and she was allegedly a PhD student at Oxford. And before we could stop her – I tried to talk with her – and before we could get the doctor from downstairs, the navy clinic, to come up and maybe talk with her she rushed out to Buckingham Palace. I called Oxford University. The dean's name was Jane Austen. It was just really one of those coincidences. I was imagining that it was Jane Austen, the writer, that the woman was hallucinating about and, in fact, that was the dean's name.

You just got these people all the time. For one young woman, I had to go to court for her bail hearings and the judge wouldn't release her until I could make sure I could repatriate her but how can you get a mentally ill person to agree to be repatriated. The family didn't want her back and the court appearance was quite a scene. The guards would drag her out of the court after she failed to agree to be repatriated and she would be screaming, "Leslie, Leslie, help me!" And finally we got her repatriated. Cases like that were very challenging and stressful, but in retrospect they make the best memories.

Q: Americans in jail?

GERSON: Yes, a lot. In fact, the jails, many of them were very, very old, even medieval but it was amazing to me that the prisoners, mainly men, never complained. In fact, although there might not have been very many showers in the oldest prisons, somehow the treatment that they received from the guards and the prison administration was always quite good. I was very impressed by that, because when I thought about some of the negative press that we were getting about our jails in the U.S. that were probably more sophisticated and better equipped, that really impressed me.

We had a women's prison in London called Holloway Prison. We had a very, very famous prisoner there who was on the front page of the tabloids for weeks. I usually visited the men's prisons. Someone else, one of my colleagues, was visiting this woman prisoner, but she eventually asked for me because I had been visiting her accomplice in a men's prison. But this case was quite something and shows you how screwed up people can get but she had apparently fallen in love with a young Mormon in the United States and she convinced another fellow to help her and they brought their Old English sheepdog, now who brings an Old English sheepdog to a quarantine country, to come over to England where the Mormon was doing his missionary work. She was convinced that if she could get him alone and seduce him that he would fall madly in love with her and that this was exactly what he needed. Well, this started out with the dog, of course,

not being allowed in the country, so I had to repatriate a dog, so to speak. But she and her accomplice apparently sort of kidnapped this young man as he was leaving a church meeting and took him to a sequestered cabin or cottage near Dartmoor, where he was tied to an iron bedstead and I can't remember whether he actually became involved with his female kidnapper or not but when he was freed he complained to the authorities. The British tabloid press just loved this story and there were cartoons every day. She and her accomplice were arrested and …

Q: And they were Americans?

GERSON: They were Americans. The accomplice I began visiting...he just seemed like a normal guy. I just can't imagine how he got sucked into this, but finally she was causing such a stir in the women's prison that they said, "Okay, Leslie, you better go and visit her, because she's demanding to see you and she's just becoming disruptive."

So I started visiting her. Quite a delusional person at the time. Eventually they escaped, they somehow were bailed out at one point when her parents came over and took responsibility and rented an apartment pending the conclusion of the trial. She and the fellow escaped to Ireland, disguised as nuns and then returned to the States.

When I would get in a cab to go and visit her and would say, "I'm going to Holloway Prison," the cabbies would always say, "You going to visit that girl?" and they always wanted to know what she was like. There wasn't a soul in England who didn't know about this case.

So it was very interesting, very interesting.

Q: That's fun. What was going on in the relationship between the U.S. and the UK at the time? Was there anything special?

GERSON: Not that I recall. It was my first tour. I was completely tied up with learning consular work and enjoying what London had to offer. I was getting my master's in the evenings. George Peabody College in Tennessee, now part of Vanderbilt University, had a program that was mainly for military people but anyone could take advantage of it and I got my master's in human development counseling there. In those days the Service paid for you to take courses related to your work.

Q: Human development counseling counted as consular?

GERSON: Believe me, there's a lot of counseling that needs to be done in consular work.

Q: Sounds like you were doing some, I guess.

GERSON: I continued to do it throughout my career.

Q: Then you got that with a view to it being useful for your consular work?

GERSON: Right.

Q: Which suggests you were already thinking about going more than your two years.

GERSON: Yes, I had already bid on my next assignment.
I think relations between the two countries were very good at the time.

Q: As they usually are. Who was prime minister then?

GERSON: Callaghan. We had a lot of strikes. We used to go home from work occasionally because there'd be no electricity. There would be the milk strike, the newspaper strike, the whatever. It was kind of the fall of the Labour government and then Thatcher came in.

Q: And who was the ambassador?

GERSON: Kingman Brewster.
Spiers was the DCM (deputy chief of mission), certainly, at one point, Ron Spiers.

Q: It certainly would have been a political ambassador.

GERSON: Yes. We never were invited to anything at all. I remember going to the Fourth of July at the ambassador's residence, in the garden, but it was a "family" event. In other words, grilled hamburgers, and the staff worked the grills. It was not the official Fourth of July. It was an embassy family Fourth of July. There was never any question of being invited to receptions or anything, at least not for me and for the majority of the people that were working in consular, unless you had volunteered to work on some sort of visit.

We had a political appointee consular officer, believe it or not. I don't know the whole story and I won't mention the name, but she was constantly volunteering whenever there was anything, because she hated to interview, she hated to do the consular work. So I suppose there were one or two people who were perhaps more often at diplomatic events.

Q: But generally not you? Did you get involved in visits? There must have been endless visits to London.

GERSON: No. I think the problem is that, in those days, first of all, there wasn't as much emphasis on junior officer development. Second of all, the embassy itself was quite huge. So it wasn't that the political section or econ section or protocol section needed help. There was a woman, Joan Auten, an FSN, who ran the protocol section. She'd been doing that for years. They could make visits happen in a nanosecond and there were plenty of people and the British FSNs could do things that in other places you would want perhaps an American to be doing. I just don't recall consular officers being tapped for these kinds of things at all.

Q: This would have been Jerry Ford's presidency. I suspect.

GERSON: Carter was elected while I was there, I believe.

Q: And how was living in London at that time?

GERSON: It was great. In addition to studying, I had a friend, John Dinger, who later became an ambassador, and we used to go to Gilbert and Sullivan performances as often as we could. I would go to the theater regularly. The dollar was very strong so you could go to the theater for a couple of dollars. I recall going often twice a week. I met my first husband there after about a year, so by the second year of my tour I was going to Oxford most weekends to be with him, visit his family and so forth.

Q: He was British?

GERSON: He was British. I met him through a visa case, very interesting visa case. Not for him, his niece, whose father had had some medical problems in the States. The father was a Bank of America executive. The niece had been sent back to the UK when her father became ill and trying to get her back and determine her visa status and so forth was complex.

Q: How was housing?

GERSON: I lived in a small apartment in Highgate. I believe they've sold those apartments now. So it was quite a long commute on the Black Line, the Northern Line. The interior decorator from what is now OBO (the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations) obviously had just come out of a mental hospital, because the kitchen was orange and the rest of the house was decorated in lime green and bright yellow. I felt like I had to wear sunglasses inside! Half the furniture had not arrived by the time I moved in. So, for quite some while my clothing was just lined up on the carpet in my bedroom because there were no drawers. The apartment was small, the smallest thing I think perhaps I've lived in. But it was great. There was greenery around. I was fine.

Q: So it was an embassy compound?

GERSON: I believe the embassy owned it and they had just bought it. There were two buildings and I was in the smaller of the two and I was very happy. I'd never lived in anything with new furniture before. Even when they offered me my salary when I first joined the Service and apologized that it was only $13,000, I said, "You just doubled my salary overnight." For me everything was kind of great.

Q: So $13,000 when you started out at that point, as I suppose it must have, what, what used to be an FSO-7 or -8 at that time?

So over this time you decided the Foreign Service wasn't a bad thing to stay in a little bit longer?

GERSON: Thought I would do it. Somehow I decided, maybe because of my own ethnic origin, that maybe I would specialize in Eastern Europe. So, at some point I bid on an onward assignment. I bid on several jobs but was assigned to Belgrade for my second tour. So when I left London I came back to DC and studied Serbo-Frustration, as we called it.

Q: So that was, what, a six-month course?

GERSON: Well, it was supposed to be an 11-month course. However, although I argued about it the entire time, I was only assigned for five months. Apparently, somehow, the NIV job in Belgrade had become de-linked from a language skill, which was a little bit bizarre.

Q: Very odd, since presumably you had to interact with …

GERSON: It had apparently been de-linked for some specific reason, for a specific assignment in the past. So, I studied for five months and then about two weeks before I was due to take my exam they said, "There's been a mistake. You're supposed to have a 3/3." I said, "Hello! What have I been saying?" They said, "See what you can do." Now, of course, other students had been studying for 11 months and not getting a 3/3 and some had been extended on to reach that goal.. So, determined as I was, I went in there and they gave me an option in the reading part, to read in either the Cyrillic or the Latin alphabet and being stubborn I chose the Cyrillic. That was what sunk me, so I got a 3/2+.

Q: After five months? Good for you!

GERSON: I was very pleased. So they let me go and off I went.

Q: Was the course in Cyrillic or Latin or both?

GERSON: Those of us going to Belgrade were reading largely in Cyrillic. Those going to Zagreb were reading largely in Latin characters. In fact, if I had chosen to read in Latin I might have done it, gotten the three in reading as well. I remember quite well, little errors I might not have made if I'd seen the words in Latin characters.

Q: So Belgrade was someplace you wanted to go? You'd had it high on your bid list?

GERSON: I did. I thought I would specialize in Eastern Europe somehow.

Q: You were in London for two years? So this would have been, '77 when you went to Belgrade, '78?

GERSON: It was '78, mid to late summer. I was only there for four months.

Q: Assigned to the consular section?

GERSON: I was. Again, there, the applicants came right into your office. You'd have to wait for them to come in and sit down, which was, of course, a tremendous time waster. I don't think I was a very effective consular officer there, not because of language, but because I've always tended to think people were telling the truth. Macedonians you could barely understand and Albanians from the south spoke a different language entirely. I didn't know enough about the country and there was no guidance, really, at all. The person who had been doing visas, who moved to another unit, let me watch him interview for a few minutes. I really had no sort of socioeconomic background to make good adjudications, but at any rate I certainly did my work.

Q: Was it a big consular section?

GERSON: No. I think there were four of us, three or four.

Q: And you were doing non-immigrant visas?

GERSON: That's right and the consul general, who's since passed away, was very nice but provided us really no guidance on how to do our jobs better or anything like that.

Q: This was still Tito times?

GERSON: It was. That was very funny because one afternoon a political parade was to pass by on the main street in front of the embassy. I lived on the compound so I just lived across the courtyard from my office. Tito was going to be participating in the parade and there were masses of people coming with big signs. It was a very positive atmosphere. We all went outside, no visa applicants were going to be able to come into the embassy during the parade anyway, and there was going to be a lot of noise. And I was standing right by two fellows, university student age, who had a large placard, one of these banners that you unfurl. One guy wanted to light a cigarette so he gave me his pole to hold. Everybody was laughing, including him, because here's the vice consul, holding the "Long Live Tito" or whatever banner. Tito was definitely still alive.

And I made friends right away through an American of Serbian origin, and I used to go out with friends in the evening. Everything starts so late there. For me, an early-to-bed person, to be told we were going to meet in the *kafana* (café) at 11:00 p.m. was like, "Whoa, I don't think so!" But I enjoyed it very much, the brief time that I was there.

Q: I want to ask more about Yugoslavia, but why only four months?

GERSON: Well, the boyfriend that I had in the UK became a little bit demanding and a little bit jealous and maybe he had a right to be because I was having a very good time and he gave me an ultimatum that either I was to leave by December 1st so we could get married or I'd never see him again. Since this was the first person that I'd ever thought was nice enough to spend very much time with, I resigned to join him.

Q: But now you must have talked before about you were going to be moving someplace else.

GERSON: Yes, and he came to Belgrade to visit me and so forth. It was only when, I think, that we discussed that I was having quite a good time and that I wasn't certain whether the future was as we had originally thought that, I won't go into all the gory details, but it was only when it became obvious that maybe this was threatening his plans that he gave me the ultimatum – quit or never see him again.

Q: Let me go back to Yugoslavia for a moment. Do you remember who the ambassador was?

GERSON: Yes, Larry Eagleburger. What a wonderful man! He would remember me today, but not on sight. What I was impressed with, he would call me up sometimes and he'd say, "You want to meet down in the snack bar for lunch?" The vice consul! He did the same thing with my replacement, who was Tom Price. He became his mentor and helped him along in his career. Maybe the same would have happened to me but frankly I've moved along just as I've wanted in my career anyway. But Ambassador Eagleburger was just such a normal person that you didn't have to be in awe of him.

Many of us lived in the compound, so the Marine bar and movies were readily accessible and the ambassador and everybody else were always there. It was a very nice community of people.

Q: And the relationship between the United States and Yugoslavia was good at the time?

GERSON: As I recall, yes. We were certainly free to travel anywhere. It was a very safe country, as I recall. As I said, people would go out very late at night because that's when things were lively. You were comfortable. There I did go to representational events occasionally. I joined a young diplomats group, which was very unusual. All the diplomats were men and when women came they were the wives, and it was a little awkward for a professional woman to integrate.

But I did meet some interesting people. Possibly they were KGB types or whatever the equivalent was. People would often tease me. They'd say, "Oh, you must be CIA." I was always sort of fighting that, "You must be CIA." But I did go to peoples' homes for dinner and they would invite me to go mushroom picking. I don't recall that I ever was able to enjoy that activity but I was invited.

I found the Yugoslavs very friendly and welcoming. People would talk to you readily.

Q: No signs for you at that point, during that short stay, that the place was going to turn into what it turned into?

GERSON: No, in fact I was kind of surprised. Of course there was always talk of what might happen when Tito died. Because many of my friends were products of mixed

marriages, the group that I hung out with, there were Serbs, Croats, I think there was one Bosnian. Of course, these were all people living in Belgrade, so it was a more cosmopolitan place. Everybody had work, so I saw none of the tensions you might have experienced elsewhere in the country. I wasn't there very long, so I never went to some places in the country but I did go to Mostar, for example, and I have my pictures of the old bridge before it was destroyed in the war.

Q: Have you been back?

GERSON: No.

Q: They've rebuilt the picturesque bridge in Mostar very nicely, actually.

GERSON: That's what I've heard. I went to Sarajevo and other places that later I could never believe had fallen on such horrible times.

Q: And Dubrovnik and the coast and so forth?

GERSON: I never went to the coast. I was saving that trip for the spring, because when I arrived it was fall and, of course, I never went because I resigned.

Q: But it was already a tourist destination for many Europeans, certainly.

GERSON: Absolutely, and Americans too.

Q: Even during communist Tito times?

GERSON: I didn't run into many Americans in the Kalemegdan fortress in Belgrade. There seemed to be more people from the developing world and from elsewhere in Eastern Europe. For example, when we would have a Romanian or someone come in and ask us for asylum, we always said, "I'm sorry, the Yugoslavs will help you cross the border to Austria or Italy, where you go to these refugee centers." Nine out of ten, I think, was the statistic of adult Yugoslavs who had passports. Being in Yugoslavia was effectively being free to travel. So it was a much easier place to serve and live than the rest of Eastern Europe at that time.

Q: So, a good start on your would-be Eastern European career. Now, getting back to the marriage was that a time when married women still had to leave the Foreign Service?

GERSON: No. In fact that had changed just before I went to London. When I was in London there were a number of married women who were coming back to the Service after having had to leave and that was a good place for tandems. So that prohibition was over.

Q: So you didn't face that discrimination at least. So it was a decision that the career and the marriage wouldn't work together under the circumstances?

GERSON: Well, there was no way. My first husband was a small business owner and he needed to be with that business. He was also heavily involved in horse racing in the UK.

Q: The same kind of problems a lot of Foreign Service couples have today?

GERSON: Right. But luckily the consul general in Belgrade told me when I wrote my letter of resignation to be sure to write it in such a way that it left a door open, that I was not leaving in dismay or in disgruntlement. I do remember when the DCM went in and told Larry Eagleburger, after I discussed with the DCM that I was going to leave, I heard this scream come out of the ambassador's office. I remember several years later, when I was a senior watch officer, I had to call Larry at home when he was either Deputy Secretary or Acting Secretary and I said, as we always did, "This is Leslie Gerson, senior watch officer. Mr. Eagleburger, I'm not sure if you remember me." He goes, "Of course I remember you! Why did you come back?" And I said, "Why did you?"

Q: So you left the Service. This was '78?

GERSON: December 1, 1978 and I drove from Belgrade to the UK without any heat in the car. I don't know if you've driven a VW Beetle with no heat in freezing weather. You cannot defrost your windshield, something had happened to the heater cables or whatever, it was freezing, we're driving at night, trying to get to Ljubljana to spend the night. The car is packed with belongings. My future husband is there with me. No deicing spray available at any of the rest stops, because everyone else has bought it out. Trying to scrape the inside of the windshield so you could see where you were going, following tail lights.

It was very frightening but we drove all the way to the UK and I think I'm probably the only person who's actually entered the UK as a fiancé with a visa because, being a visa officer, I wanted to enter with some sort of document. The British consul in Belgrade kept saying, "Just go! Just go and tell them when you get off the ferry that you're going to get married." I said, "I'm not going without a document" because of course we are so document oriented in our Foreign Service. I wanted to be sure I had something. Of course, when I got there British immigration had no idea what to do with this visa-like document.

Q: So you went to live in Oxford?

GERSON: I actually lived in Bristol. Although my husband was from Oxford and his family lived there, his business was in Bristol. It was a janitorial service, office cleaning business. He had settled on Bristol because it had the most new office space outside of London so he thought it would be good to develop in that market. But every weekend we drove back to Oxford because he was an amateur jockey and he rode out, which is a term of art, at a stable in Banbury, which is closer to Oxford. We always stayed with his parents there while he did his riding out. His parents owned race horses that were jumpers, so we also went to a lot of races.

Even when I was a vice consul in London earlier I had participated in buying into a racing syndicate. My husband was one of the first people who syndicated a horse so that normal people like you and me could buy into a modestly priced race horse. You owned it as part of a group. In fact, in our case, eight people owned the horse. We were quite successful with our race horses, not so much on the money side but just on the fun side.

I worked in his business, which involved supervising all these cleaners that worked only a couple of hours a day, often people on the dole who just wanted to be paid in cash, cleaning offices, factories, pubs. I can clean a pub toilet in a working class area of Bristol as well as anybody after a Friday night bash. We built that company up very rapidly, and it was bought out by a multinational company after a couple of years.

Q: So how long were you there?

GERSON: Almost three years, either in Bristol or we eventually moved to Ayr, Scotland, after we sold the company. There my husband was an assistant trainer at the race course. I worked, at least as long as I could put up with it, which was not very long, for an employment agency in Glasgow. So I used to take the train into Glasgow every day for work.

Q: As an American in the UK there was no problem working?

GERSON: Well, no, I was a permanent resident, so no problem at all. In fact, the only problem in finding work in Scotland was when I went in for an interview people would say, "And your husband is from where?" and I'd say, "England." There was always an imperceptible drop of the smile. They would have preferred that I say he was a Scot.

Q: So, three more years in the UK?

GERSON: More or less, yeah. Then my husband sold the business. In order to build up the business like that we were literally earning nothing. I would get a wage packet of 12 pounds and I would have to buy food with that. We were always living hand to mouth. He was quite a schemer, actually became CEO of a very large company in the U.S. He's a person without extensive formal education but with a keen business sense.

But I'm a person who is happier working in a more structured setting, where I know I'm going to get a certain amount of money and I can save some. So I said, "Look, if I'm going to work this hard for nothing and you don't want to work, why don't I rejoin the Foreign Service?" So he said, "Great idea! Let's go somewhere where we can have servants and where it's warm and I'll continue racing in the season and then I'll come to wherever you are."

So I applied to rejoin the Foreign Service. Not good timing, because Ronald Reagan had imposed a hiring freeze. Not only, to get rehired, did you have to show that you were from a deficit cone, which luckily I was, but you had to get an exemption from this hiring

freeze. Then, of course, we had no money at that point, and they called me to come on short notice for the oral exam in July. So I had to cough up the big money for a ticket to Washington for the oral exam and when I got there I walked in and they were all sort of smirking at me. I just said to the examiners, "What's going on?" It turned out that Bernie Fennell, my first supervisor from London, was serving on the Board of Examiners at that time, and he shared an office with one of the people who was on my exam panel and had told them all about me. So they'd already made their decision that I was going to be rehired. So I was a little upset, because I'd paid all this money to get to DC, but it was a very friendly interview and, of course, I knew when I left that I was rehired.

Q: Was this a similar setup, then? The exam hadn't changed since you took it before?

GERSON: This was more like an interview in my recollection because these people had already made up their minds and I don't recall that I knew any of them but they obviously knew about me. They had reviewed all of my performance evaluations and so forth and I don't recall having to answer any questions about history or anything. More a little bit about my career, what I'd learned. At that point I felt that I owed the State Department big time, so I said, "Anywhere you want to send me I will go."

Q; So, rejoining like this, you didn't have to go back to A-100, you didn't have to go back to any special training?

GERSON: In fact, I was given four days or something of consultations in Washington and that was all.

Q: And you passed your exam and were sort of given an assignment?

GERSON: Right. It wasn't instantaneous. I can't remember if they had to update the security clearance. But it was relatively quick, as I recall.

Q: And it wasn't a problem, having the foreign spouse?

GERSON: No, not that I recall.

Q: So we're talking what year?

GERSON: I went to Haiti in May 1981. I came into the State Department, did a few things. They were working on maybe getting a job for my husband. As soon as I set foot in the State Department I felt like I was coming home, and he felt very upset and wanted me to quit--again. And that was sort of the beginning of the end, but I said, "No, after they've brought me back in and all of this and all of the efforts that I've made, if we don't like it after the two years in Haiti, that's a juncture at which one can make that decision. But I'm going through with this assignment." And off I went to Haiti, which is where they needed me.

Q: Back to a consular job again, of course?

GERSON: Exactly. I was going to be the head of the NIV unit. Of course I had only had, effectively, one tour, where I had done maybe eight, nine months in NIVs. When I arrived in Haiti, of the nine officers there, if I recall the numbers properly, including the consul general, everyone except me was new to consular work. The consul general himself had not done consular work in the field for years. I think one person had been there for a few months. The rest were all new to the Service.

Q: So, an NIV section with you and …

GERSON: No, I'm talking about the whole consular section. There wasn't anyone to give guidance. It was trial by fire. We probably made a lot of mistakes but we scraped our way through.

Q: Haiti has a reputation of being one of the most difficult NIV posts, doesn't it?

GERSON: Well, it is. I don't think I was fully prepared for it. None of us were prepared for it. It was just at the time when we arrived there that the boat people migration was really starting. So you would deny somebody a visa and they would just say, "Well, I'll just take a boat." It was a little bit unnerving.

Of course everything was fake. If you would give a visa to someone with a specific story that was very credible you could be sure that the next day you'd have five people with that same story, either because the first person also was a fake or because somebody interviewed them on their way out: "Oh, you got your visa? What did you say?" And you'd have five people repeating the story the next day.

So it was very, very difficult.

Q: You were on a supervisory position here or were you actually on the …

GERSON: I was on the line as well. I don't enjoy interviewing, I'll tell you, but you had to. How can you lead a group of people who've never done this, how can you get through your work? We didn't have appointment systems in those days, although I did an appointment system of my own. At one point I just became overwhelmed and I realized I had to give these people appointments. So you'd have people lining up at 2:00, 3:00 in the morning, people selling places in line. The police would come and reform the line, extorting money out of people. So sometimes I would get up and at 3:00 a.m., which you would never do in Haiti nowadays, I in my little VW, would drive to the consular section, pull up, and you'd see the police manhandling people and having them line up. The only way I could kind of keep them honest was by getting up in the middle of the night and arriving there myself to spot check them. So out of people's desperation, there were all sorts of money making schemes related to that.

Q: In one of the poorest and maybe the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

GERSON: Well, in those days you didn't have to pay to apply for a visa, either. Now, of course, the more than hundred dollar fee makes it less likely that a person is just going to capriciously come every day. But there, you could end up with people coming every single day, because they thought that it might be their good day or they did a voodoo sacrifice and that would somehow improve their chances. Touts would say, "You didn't get the visa because you didn't buy the right packet of documents." This was where you would get these documents with the ink coming off. People would rent tuxedos to come in and see you. You saw somebody standing there in an oversized tuxedo with a frilly lavender shirt, you knew you weren't looking at a bona fide applicant.

But your heart would go out to these people. They had just spent the few dollars that they had to try to increase their chances of getting a visa, only enriching some purveyor of false documents, when you weren't going to give that visa at all. It was very difficult.

Q: And very high pressure, I suppose?

GERSON: Yes and masses of people every single day.

Q: Did you get bad publicity because of the lines?

GERSON: Not much. I don't think many officials cared what their people went through. We tried to do things to help, we had one line on one side for people who'd already traveled, because you figure you can get through those very quickly in the morning. So they would be the first people to come in.

Q: People who had already had a visa once?

GERSON: A U.S. visa of any sort, even just a one-entry visa, because you could usually evaluate that very quickly. They're often issued. Many of them were little traders who would go to Puerto Rico and buy things and come in and sell them in the countryside. Regular people as well. You didn't have a drop box. So you could get through those very quickly.

Then we had old peoples' day, which was on Thursdays, when people that were over sixty or whatever, they could come and stand in line and come in first, because we didn't usually have a big problem with the elderly and why should they be standing in line in the hot sun?

We tried little initiatives and then I thought at one point, "I'm going to give appointments" because you had to cut off the line every day otherwise. People would be waiting and you just couldn't see that many people. So on a particular day we put out a notice, I can't remember whether we did an announcement on the radio or whether it just went out through the jungle telegraph, that we would be giving appointments for the rest of the summer. And on that day, I could not see the end of the line when I arrived at work. People told me it went all the way to the stadium, which would be a couple of miles. There was never any pushing, nothing. I arrived at maybe 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. Of

course we let in the people that could be seen that day and then I had a system of numbers and then numbers and letters of the alphabet. I would give x number per day and they I'd move on to the next one. People would be told their code and then the next day they could come back or send somebody and there'd be a sign up that would have the day that that number corresponded to, because they were never going to remember the date given on that crazy day.

Q: So the two mile line was to get an appointment?

GERSON: That's right. But then the people would know they'd be seen on that appointment day, the appointment code was written in their passport, it wasn't written on piece of paper that they could sell. If they wanted to bring four passports because they had three children I could at least see that the names were the same. It didn't matter to me if the family came in with the same number. People were bringing me water and soft drinks. It was very hot and we had to keep moving back as the shade moved from where I was actually standing. At 2:00 in the afternoon there wasn't one person left in the line. I think that got quite good publicity.

And of course there would be people that didn't know about it, but those people we could fit in. We could always just fit in extras. That was sort of a very primitive way of doing things but it kind of worked.

Q: It sounds like a good system to start on, relieve the pressure on everybody.

GERSON: Well, people liked it. They felt you were trying to do something for them. But, very unusual, because sometimes you'd open a passport and voodoo dust would fall out. You'd go out to your car and there'd be a little cocoon coffin there.

Q: Voodoo dust? Is this supposed to get you?

GERSON: Right. I always arrived early and I and a young man, we always worked outside. I never let anyone else have a key to the consular section. But, at any rate, I was the one who opened it until the Marine Security Guard got there, then he opened it for everybody. So my assistant and I always used to let the people in to the outside waiting area and get them lined up in the morning and make sure they had all the documents they needed. So one morning, it's time, they're all in, however many we're going to interview that day and I walk in and there's no one in the rest of the NIV unit.

The phones are ringing off the hook, so I pick up the phones and it turns out that everyone who had eaten in the snack bar, in the little consular section snack bar, the previous day had come down with horrible food poisoning and only my assistant and I hadn't eaten there. So we were the only two and here I had let in the number of people that we normally saw with full staff. So I had to go out say, "Look, I think I can do this number myself and the rest of you, let me give you a number and you'll come tomorrow."

Q: And you did the interviewing in French or did you learn Creole?

GERSON: Almost all of us learned enough Creole. Creole speakers can often understand you when you speak French. The problem is your understanding their answers, but we all got to be proficient enough, particularly with the old people. You got the basics that you needed in Creole.

Q: The whole tour was just NIV's?

GERSON: Yes. For me, since I was the NIV chief.

Q: It was a two year, three year?

GERSON: Two year.

Q: Was this still Baby Doc time?

GERSON: Baby Doc. It was extremely safe, if you were not a political opponent. There was some opposition, but the most unsafe thing was that if his motorcade was going somewhere, like to the beach, and you happened to get in the way you could easily be pushed off the side of the road.

Q: So, very safe. That's interesting. Now it's supposed to be one of the most dangerous places you can be.

GERSON: Horrible. But you could go out in the middle of the night, as I sometimes did, "Let's go get a sandwich." By then I was divorced from my husband and I had a Haitian friend who later became my husband. We would go out, get a sandwich in the middle of the night, go out eating, you could walk. There was a little shantytown across the street from my house. The neighbors would come and they'd ask if they could make a phone call or take water out of my cistern. I'd pick up people who were hitchhiking. You never thought twice.

Q: And the relationship with the United States?

GERSON: Seemed to be quite good.

Q: We were supporting dictators at the time? Still Cold War, I guess.

GERSON: There was American business down there. I don't think we liked Duvalier. We all used to talk about wouldn't it be great if he was gone but nobody realized what chaos, now they'd be happy, frankly, many, if Duvalier came back, if it resulted in the kind of security that you had there at that time. There wasn't a law and order problem because there were police everywhere. It was just kind of understood there was a military presence, there was a police presence. They could be brutal but not regularly.

There were factories that were open, so there were people working. It's always been said in Haiti that if one person works in a factory, 15 people live off of that. The pigs weren't slaughtered, yet, so people had enough money to pay for their kids to go to school. Almost all schooling is private in Haiti.

We had the unfortunate AID (Agency for International Development) great pig fiasco while I was there. The Haitians had giant black furry pigs that ate anything, including clothing, tin cans. They just rummaged. Everywhere in the street they were eating things. Apparently it was diagnosed that some of them had swine fever. Now that one of these pigs would swim to the United States – I'm not sure quite how that was going to happen. Haiti certainly did not export pork, to the best of my knowledge. But AID initiated a program where the pigs would all be destroyed and each of the farmers would be given a new pig of a different variety to replace them once all the pigs had been eradicated. I think they got $25 per pig.

Well, the big thing is that the pig was the cash crop for the average Haitian family. Slaughtering one pig could pay for schooling, uniforms and everything for a family or food or whatever. So farmers cooperated and they eagerly awaited the return of a new pig and of course when we sent back pigs probably they were somebody's excess pigs here in the States. They were small white piglets that eventually would grow into giant white pigs, but only if they were kept in clean, cement-enclosed enclosures and grain fed. No Haitian could afford to do that. So the peasants ended up selling them to people who could. So there was no more cheap pork on the market for people to eat, no more cash crop for people. So they started chopping down more trees, often mango trees. Mango is an excellent fruit for your family, good vitamins. You started seeing an increase of children with distended bellies and red hair. It was a fiasco.

And many people equated the end of the pigs with the fall of the Duvalier regime. In other words, the economic blight that resulted gave people sort of the impetus to participate in an eventual revolt. I don't know that that can be scientifically proven but certainly there have been things written about it, the pigs being the beginning of the end of Duvalier.

Q: When did he fall, do you remember?

GERSON: I think it was at least three years later, three to five years later.

Q; Do you remember who was ambassador at the time?

GERSON: When I first got there it was Ernie Preeg. I did a major infiltration of a smuggling operation there, which resulted in the downfall of the vice minister of interior and I remember Ambassador Preeg saying afterwards when we were debriefing him, "Leslie, if I give you the names of some other cabinet members that we don't like would you see what you can do?"

He was replaced by Clay McManaway.

Q: This brings up an interesting story, maybe. You were involved in bringing down a cabinet minister?

GERSON: Well, I wasn't really interested in the cabinet minister. Someone was smuggling aliens big time. You asked about fraud earlier, going on right and left. And one of them, it was so obvious and we didn't know how it was being done, was a travel agency and the travel agency was run by the wife of this vice minister. I did not know this at the time, hadn't focused on who she was related to. It was just incredible that she was getting people to the States. It was well known. I had a snitch who worked outside the place where you got your exit visas. So through him and my husband and talk on the street, you knew that stuff was going on and this woman was kind of notorious.

Get on one of her "tours" to Puerto Rico, now there are secondary controls between Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands and the U.S., at least at that time, so in other words if you got a visa that said "Puerto Rico only" you supposedly couldn't just board a plane from Puerto Rico to the U.S. without the immigration inspectors seeing that and questioning you. But these people were getting to New York and Miami.

I was just beside myself and I decided to take her on, but the only way I was going to be able to do this is if I had somebody on one of her trips. These were always poor people from the countryside, semi-literate. So I asked my husband if he knew somebody. Well, he found somebody, he knew somebody right away. This person was very excited about being a plant in the smuggling trip. He went to the woman's travel agency and said, "I just have to get to the States and I heard you can help me." The woman said, "Well, my tour is already full. I can't get any more visas. So if you can get a visa on your own, you can come but I can't do it for you."

So of course we could make that happen, no problem. So he went back to her, very excited: "I got my visa! I got my visa to Puerto Rico!" So he was on this tour. So meanwhile I thought, "Did I bother to tell anybody?" No. I didn't get permission from the State Department. My boss, I think, knew what I was doing. The ambassador didn't know anything. I was very worried, we thought U.S. immigration in Puerto Rico might be involved. I must have called somebody, because they gave me the name of the head of immigration in Puerto Rico and I called him and told him what we were going to do and he hand-picked a group of immigration officials to work with me. And my husband had to go, because somebody had to identify the plant in the group and had to be able to talk to him in Creole and then share this with the immigration people, who couldn't get too close.

So my husband, now we're not talking about my British husband, we're talking about the man who would become my Haitian husband. We were not married at the time. I paid for all of this, the fellow to go on the trip, my husband's trip. So they headed over to Puerto Rico, the group was put into some sort of sleazebag hotel. For several days nothing happened. There was a burnt out building across the street. My husband and somebody from U.S. immigration waited there every day. The fellow in the group would come out

occasionally at night and talk to my husband and tell him what was going on.

And finally they moved them, immigration following them. They moved them to the Virgin Islands, a small airstrip where they were heading off to the States. They were all on the plane and immigration boarded and they arrested them. They arrested an American citizen with them, too, who was actually involved. He ran a butcher shop in Haiti; he was an American of Haitian origin. And they arrested my plant, too, but they gave him sort of a careful high five because they didn't want to finger him. They were taken off to jail and a hearing where they reported on what they had done and where they were going, and then they were all sent back to Haiti.

It turns out that when the scandal hit in the paper and everything, the woman travel agent was exposed and her husband was canned from his job, as well. Apparently he was very difficult to deal with, but I didn't know that. All I knew is I wanted to stop this smuggling and find out if somebody in U.S. immigration was involved. I don't think anybody was, but we didn't know that at the time.

Of course I'd spent quite a large sum of money myself and I never asked for it back but eventually Ron Somerville in CA/EX (the Bureau of Consular Affairs' executive office) actually gave it back to me and he told me, "Don't ever do that again, without asking permission first!"

Q: That's pretty gutsy, to do that without even telling your own ambassador. Maybe he would have liked this cabinet minister. Then what would have happened?

GERSON: Anyway, that was the story about alien smuggling. But we had one thing after another.

I was the one that made Evans Paul ineligible for a visa. He was subsequently a candidate for president and was mayor of Port-au-Prince, he was an actor, head of an acting troupe, he smuggled people. Some of his "clients" were caught at immigration and then I had to build the case when they said that they paid Evans Paul x amount of money. I created his ineligibility, which means that even to this day he has to travel to the U.S. with a waiver.

Fraud was everywhere. You could only go after the big fish. You never worried about the small fry. We had the voodoo dance groups who would go up to perform in festivals and we'd have to audition them all. Even then it turned out anybody can learn to basically do that type of performance, and there were always ringers in those groups. Nothing, you couldn't trust anything organized at all.

Q: Nonetheless, I suppose a lot of people got through.

GERSON: Sure. I'm sure they do even today, when the refusal rate is much higher and you have a lot of technical aids to help you adjudicate visas.

Q: Now, how about the boat people? You mentioned that. That was big at the time?

GERSON: It was starting up. You had people going, efforts to turn them around. People would just leave your place and plunk down their money and go by boat.

We also had a problem, our consul general, he's a friend to this day. As I said, he hadn't been working in the field for a while and he had a lot of people who would appeal to him after we had denied their visas. They were always people that presented themselves as being prominent and having a lot of political information to give, so he would chat with them and he would take copious notes and he would write political reports and everything. Then they'd have a handful of people that they allegedly knew very well and they always claimed the consuls just never understood them and he would issue the visas. It would drive me insane. Finally, some folks in the State Department came to look at our process and see what was going on. That ended the dual track visa application snafu. He was just so anxious to be of service that he just didn't realize these contacts were just glorified visa fixers.

Haitians are nice people, despite these problems. I'd love to have Haitian neighbors. But you can't let everyone in to the U.S. because they're nice.

Q: Now being the American consul in Port-au-Prince must have made you a very important person.

GERSON: I lost my name. I was called "Consul" everywhere that I went, because I was very unusual looking, with this long blonde hair. Not a lot of long blonde haired people walking around Haiti. I only ever shopped at one very tiny grocery store, because those people never asked me for a thing. Every time I would step out and go to the *Prix Unique* people at the checkout would ask, "Can I have a visa?" Once a wheel fell off of my VW after it had been serviced and the VW garage guy, after I told them my car had fallen apart in the middle of the main square of Port-au-Prince and they came the next day, they checked over all the wheel bolts and everything, the guy asked me for a visa. I said, "You made my car fall apart! And now you want me to give you a visa!" You'd go up for communion in church, people would ask you, "Consul, Consul" when I'm waiting in line to go to communion! It was appalling. When I would leave for a few days' vacation somewhere else I would just feel like, "I have a name now!" You were clearly identifiable everywhere.

People would find their way to your house. I came home one night and there was a turkey running around in my garden and a huge sack of fruit. At one point there was $500 left by hopeful visa applicants. It was all in hopes that they were going to get something from me. I didn't keep this turkey, but I didn't know who to return it to. I gave it away to a priest at a church.

Q: What did you do with the turkey?

GERSON: I discovered that they don't operate well when you put a plastic garbage bag over their heads. They just get very upset. You have that black plastic garbage bag with

feet sticking out running around your living room.

But people were desperate and they still are. In fact my husband wrote a screenplay at one point for a movie, I still have it, called *Multiple Visa*, which was designed to show the desperation that people will go through to try to get that visa and the money that they will lay out in hope of going to the U.S.

Q: And when they went presumably they were not planning to return anytime soon?

GERSON: No. The problem is, sometimes you can see a very, very poor person, a farmer, whatever, who will never stay in the States but who wants to go to visit a child, versus a person who already has a pretty good job and speaks a little English who you'd think might not leave that job but will, because they're not as attached to their country as the farmer and they have a greater desire to advance themselves.

But sometimes you can do some things. There was a little guy called Willie, he was in his last year of high school. I learned later that he was the oldest of a family of about eight kids and his parents had put every penny that they had into his education. He started coming to the visa section about a year before he was going to graduate. He kept coming and applying for visas. He'd say, "Today a good day, Madame?" "Willie, it's not a question of a good day," I would answer. I'd go through the rules. He had so many refusal stamps on the last page of his passport that the stamps had overflowed to the second page already. "My birthday today, Madame." I'd respond with, "I don't care! That doesn't change a thing." Over time we became a little friendly and I tried to explain to him. "Madame, I've got to earn a living. The rest of my siblings and my parents are counting on me."

At one point a lot of cruise line companies would hire Haitians as cabin boys and cooks and they would sometimes come and they would offer us, if any of our staff had relatives that they would like them to hire, they would try to give priority to relatives of our FSNs. So at one point Norwegian Caribbean, I think, was coming and the interviewer said, "Anybody you want, I'm going to be at the Holiday Inn interviewing, just send them over." So our staff, they always had cousins and so forth who were interested and I went into the files and I pulled out Willie's file, because we filed our visa applications alphabetically in those days. I called the school and I said, "I'm trying to get hold of Willie." And so he called back and I said, "Willie, do you speak English?" because they needed English speakers. "Oh, Madame, it's my best subject!" I thought, "Well, I'm not really sure." But I said, "Willie, there's this opportunity to work on a cruise ship. They're interviewing at the Holiday Inn. If you want to go, you can say that you were sent by the consulate."

So later that week, maybe Friday afternoon, the guy comes in from Norwegian Caribbean with a handful of applications for people that he's going to hire, of all these people he's been interviewing, because he wants me to see them so that I will know when the letters come that they'd really interviewed and hired them. I said, "Could I look through those? I'm just looking for somebody that I sent over, a young man with a scar on his cheek."

"Oh," he said, "Here it is! My best applicant! We're going to make him the manager of the poolside snack bar!" I said, "You're kidding me!" It took a few months. Just after Willie finished school that summer they called that batch. He went off with a seaman's visa to work for Norwegian Caribbean, where he would be earning decent money, all in dollars, living on the ship. It was like his dream come true. I don't know where he ended up five years later but I do know that one person I got a job on Norwegian Caribbean, somebody my husband referred to me, he's still working there today.

A consular officer, half of everything that you issue, in a place like that, it's probably the wrong decision and half of everybody that you refuse is probably the wrong decision. You can't go to sleep at night worrying about it too much.

Q: And then, as consul, presumably you were very popular on the social circuit as well.

GERBER: People would just walk up to you and say, "I'd like to be your friend." I had very few friends there, Haitian friends, deliberately, because I couldn't afford to do it. I told people about it later when I was training people who were going to go to Haiti. I said, "Be very careful, because most people who want to be your friend, it's not genuine." Unfortunately, when we move on to the next assignment, you'll see that people got themselves into trouble by not listening to me, or maybe they had intended to get into trouble before they went there.

My husband and I were very careful. He came every night to the house. He parked down the hill, walked up, after dark, came in for dinner, so that people didn't see him. There are people who never knew that I had met a Haitian, because he specifically did not want to be targeted either or have people asking him for things.

Q: Everybody in the embassy would have gotten some of this, I suspect.

GERSON: Everybody.

Q: But you particularly.

GERSON: Particularly, but even people, there was a young woman who worked in the political section on one of these one-year rotations. Her portfolio involved the military, she sent over visa referrals like you wouldn't believe, an incredible number. We were not really in a position to judge. She was supposed to be the one who knew about these people. Well, by the time she came over to the consular section she was no longer dating the person she'd been dating while in political. She started to date a travel agent, a big no-no for a consular officer. And we discovered also that clients from that travel agency were coming and fighting to see her in line. The envelopes they brought from the travel agency had tell-tale, very clear indications where they'd come from. Her refusal rate was extremely low and people from that travel agency were all getting visas.

Again, I'm not certain, we were aware of this, we were looking at it, I don't want to say that there was malfeasance. I think it was just complete gullibility. We had a conversation

on it, she said to me that she felt because of her ethnicity and her relationships in Haiti that she knew better than I did which applicants were qualified for visas.

I myself was quite careful, some people did know about my future husband but it was like saying because I'm of Belorussian origin that I knew something more than others about the Soviet Union at the time. It just couldn't be true.

So it was very stressful. You had to be vigilant. You had to look at your own consuls and your own employees.

There was a fraud that I detected one day, just sitting down to do a job that I didn't usually do and I saw it right away. Yet somebody else had been doing that job probably for several days and had not noticed the fraud. It was a simple thing, but you just have to be vigilant all the time

Q: What was it, just for example?

GERSON: Not everything was automated like today, so after you finished interviewing your passports came back and an employee ran them through what we called an AVLOS machine that printed you out a teletype sheet on which the consul checked the applicants' names, if they'd ever been refused before, had a criminal history or whatever. Then an officer would go back and review that and after checking to make sure that there were no "hits" or clearly note that there were "hits" that had been overcome, the visas would go to be printed. So I sat down to do that task this particular day because the other officers were still interviewing. The first thing I saw on top of two stacks of passports that were waiting there were passports that were allegedly replacements for previously stolen passports that had visas in them. Well, the first thing I thought is, "Why? Which FSN's pulled out those applications without my asking them to do it?" Because the FSN's were good, but they were not notorious for thinking a step ahead of where you needed to be.

So I sat down and I said, "Who pulled these out?" BIG mistake. At that point I didn't know what I was looking at. Nobody said anything.

So I thought, "Five or six replacements for lost or stolen visas in one day." Then I looked at the initials and I realized one of them was funky. I realized those were all fabricated previous issuances. So the officer sitting down and reviewing those in a hurry would think, "Okay, yes, they had a previous visa. I'll just replace it." But those applicants had never had a previous visa. The "old" applications were all fabricated.

So I did actually process the issuances, with a view to tracking them, to see who came to pick them up. I'd already said too much and no one ever came to pick them up. I never knew who from the inside was involved. It could have been an officer, could have been an FSN, could have been anybody. But that could have gone on for months, at four or five a day, had I not chanced to sit down and do that name check review on that day.

Q: What a clever scam.

GERSON: Now, of course, you can't do that in the same way.

Q: So you were married in Haiti, while you were still there?

GERSON: No. The divorce and annulment process of my first marriage took a number of years and so I moved on. My husband and I actually married 11 years later in El Salvador. We were together for 26 years.

Q: Was there any problem from Diplomatic Security, whatever it was called then, from having a Haitian boyfriend?

GERSON: No. We were not cohabiting either, but everyone knew him. He had been dating a person before me from the embassy as well.

Q: And life in Haiti was pleasant enough?

GERSON: It was. It was hot, dusty. Going to buy your supplies was an ordeal. Small place, not a lot of choice and you had your Saturday morning of rushing out and you'd buy your fruit on the side of the road and the vendors would dump bags of oranges loose in the back seat. It was a cash economy. But I had a small little pool, kind of a wading pool, in my back yard. I had a housekeeper and a gardener.

Q: A house, as well. For the first time, a house off of the compound, huh? Moving up!

GERSON: My husband and I went to the beach every weekend and did snorkeling and we picnicked and we rode horses. He had horses and we'd invite other people from the embassy, ride through the sugarcane fields in the area where they're now building the new embassy, where my husband is now buried. There wasn't a lot of partying or anything like that, just a lot of entertaining at home. We had Richard Burton there, became friendly with him. That's another story.

Q: A Haiti connection?

GERSON: Well, I got a three-party call from the then INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) and a lawyer one day, at the end of the day. They wanted to give me a work petition approval over the phone for Richard Burton and for his, sort of manager-companion, business manager. This is very unusual. You usually have to have a written petition, but I realized Richard Burton was just not an ordinary person. They said, "He's coming down there for a few days and he'd like to get his visa for *Private Lives*," which was something he did in New York and at the Kennedy Center with Elizabeth Taylor. This was after their divorce. I took all the information down and was told that Brook Williams, the person that was with Richard Burton, the son of Emlyn Williams, a great British actor, would call me when they arrived.

A few days later Brook Williams called and said, "Can I come over with the passports?"

You didn't have to have personal interviews in those days. I said, "Oh, Mr. Burton can't come himself?" He said, "Well, does he have to?" I said, "No, he doesn't." He said, "It's already been a mess. The president wants to see him. He just came in his lounging clothes. It's already much higher profile than he wanted." Remember, he was in *The Comedians*, which was the film version of the Graham Greene book about Haiti and all. I said, "Okay, no problem."

But about five minutes later the phone rings again. He says, "Richard has decided he'll come and Sally" (that's his last wife, they weren't married yet) "and I will come." Well, the consulate's about a mile and a half from the embassy so, again, I don't tell the embassy, do I? The Marine Security Guard had a camera. We only had one little small lavatory. Every female FSN was in there, applying makeup. Everything came to a halt.

So they came and Richard Burton came right inside the section and we took care of the visas, but he stayed for at least a hour, signed the cast of one guy who had a broken arm, had his picture taken with everybody. The other consular units came over as well.

Q: You did tell the embassy?

GERSON: Only afterwards.

Q: You said the other sections …

GERSON: Of the consulate. The Marine may have said something to his colleagues at the chancery, I don't know. I personally didn't start getting on the phone. So at the end of this, when they're ready to leave, Richard says, "Can I talk to you for a minute?" So we went in my office and he said, "I have another problem." I thought, "Well, I'm not the British consul here." He said, "I'd like to buy a house here. I've lost all my other houses in the sun in my various marriage settlements but I'm staying at the El Rancho hotel and the owner has shown me some properties. The prices asked just took me aback. I don't mind being robbed a little bit, but I have my limits." I said, "Well, look, I think I can do a little bit of investigation. There's someone I can put you in touch with. Perhaps I could call you later and give you a name." He said, "Just come for dinner."

By then the consul general was there, hanging around, so he invited him, too. He said, "Bring somebody." I said, "Well, I have a boyfriend who's a Haitian." I located somebody, with my husband's help, Guy Mallory, who was later assassinated, to help him find a house. He bought one a few days later. So we went, we had dinner. Burton was a great raconteur. He and my husband hit it off. He loved languages and he was very interested in Creole. So the CG leaves later on his own, in his own car. We bundled, my husband and I, into my VW Beetle and Richard says, "Come back, just the two of you."

So we go again two nights later and we had another great time. Then the pope was coming the next day, so everything in Haiti's capital was going to be shut down.

Q: John XXIII?

GERSON: Yes. So we get in the car and we are driving away and Richard says, "Okay, I'll see you Thursday." I said to my husband, "We're coming back again?" He said, "No, he's coming to your house for dinner." I said, "What? No, nothing's even open! The whole town is closed down and I'm having Richard Burton to dinner at my house!" So, two nights later, he and Sally and Brook Williams came for dinner. I served two types of rice. Came to find out Richard Burton didn't like rice. But we had a very good evening at my house. My cook at the time came rushing out with an old Time magazine in which she found a picture of Richard Burton, so she knew who he was. We had a good time. He left Haiti shortly thereafter.

We kept in touch, kind of. Then at one point I was going to be in Washington, it was right when *Private Lives* was going to be on stage, so Richard Burton said, "I'll leave tickets for you at the box office. As soon as the curtain goes down, someone will be there to take you backstage." So we enjoyed the play and literally the minute the curtain came down (we were on the aisle), Brook Williams came and got us and we went backstage. There was no one else there, except Elizabeth Taylor and Richard and Sally. Elizabeth Taylor didn't seem too interested in who we were, but we had a nice chat with Richard and Sally. And then gradually, we weren't in constant touch. He died not long thereafter. As you probably know, he's buried very close to Geneva, in a small, old graveyard. We went and visited his tomb while I was serving in Geneva.

Q: How interesting! What an experience! You said the pope was coming the next day? Did they close down the whole city for him?

GERSON: Pretty much. The pope always kissed the soil of the country he was visiting when he got off the plane but I can't remember what it was that he refused to do, maybe refused to shake Jean-Claude's hand, but there was something that made it quite clear that he disapproved of the government. This supported the gradual buildup to the downfall of Jean-Claude, or in his sermon he said something that people took as a clear criticism of the lack of political freedom.

Q: So it was a heavily Catholic country?

GERSON: Oh, yes.

Q: Despite the voodoo? Or did voodoo fit into Catholicism?

GERSON: Absolutely, it's got all the Catholic saints and everything. There's an evangelical Protestant movement, a lot of the more active missionary groups are evangelical Protestant. There's a huge Episcopal cathedral there with wonderful primitive Haitian paintings, frescos, on the wall. So there are other religions, but predominantly Haitians are Catholic.

Q: And were there other big visits? Richard Burton, of course. But anything official that springs to mind?

GERSON: Not that I can remember. I remember we did a law of the sea negotiation. The State Department had sent an interpreter with them, but they asked me to go and do it, because the person, somebody that had allegedly a 4/4 or 4+/4+ language qualification in French was going to do this but couldn't. So I remember I did participate a little bit in interpretation for the law of the sea negotiations. But I don't recall any big visits.

Q: Bilateral negotiations.

GERSON: I don't recall any big Secretarial negotiations or anything. Again, we were pretty much chained to the interview windows.

Q: So that's two years in Haiti. Anything else on Haiti spring to mind?

GERSON: Not that I can think of, except it's a very fascinating place.

Q: It certainly sounds like it.

GERSON: And doesn't deserve its history.

Q: So you would have left there in

GERSON: '83.

Q: And you went through the normal bid process?

GERSON: I did and I went back to teach at ConGen Rosslyn (the consular training program).

Q: That was something you had asked to?

GERSON: Right. I wanted to be close to my then fiancé.

Q: Today is October 10, 2007 I'm continuing my interview with Leslie Gerson. Was ConGen Rosslyn your first Washington assignment?

GERSON: My first Washington assignment, other than my five months of Serbian language training and my initial training. So I came back to be an instructor at ConGen Rosslyn.

Q: Was this a job that you had bid on and wanted to do?

GERSON: Yes. I have, in my entire career, always gotten my first or second choice of jobs and usually knew I was likely to get them even before the bid list was sent in. So I have no complaints about the personnel system at State.

I didn't particularly choose that job for any career enhancing purposes. I've always believed that when you enjoy what you're doing you find a couple of advantages in every job, whether or not it advances your career on paper. I believe that if you do enjoy your job and you do a good job, any job can advance your career. But it kind of married my prior teaching experience with my love of consular work, my liking to train other people, and also kept me close enough to Haiti, because, now, all of a sudden, my career choices were no longer Eastern Europe, but had to be the Western Hemisphere.

It was a great job and had an excellent team of instructors. ConGen was a fairly new operation at that time. The hands-on program had maybe only been around a couple of years, and it was a very exciting place to be, with a constantly developing curriculum.

Q: And it was still in Rosslyn at that time?

GERSON: The training took place in Rosslyn, absolutely, but the training scenarios all took place in a fictional country called "Z". We had tee shirts made and established a national day. And national day celebrations have continued until this day. The current teaching staff invite all the instructors back and all the students dress up in the "national costume." You have to laugh when you're doing these things, because otherwise it's a lot of regulations to learn and can be overwhelming.

Q: ConGen Rosslyn didn't even exist when I was doing my consular training.

GERSON: It didn't for me, either. Consular training was just a lecture format.

Q: You were doing the standard, what was it, one month course that all consular officers had to take?

GERSON: I think it was a little bit longer than one month by that time. But when I taught ConGen, initially I began with special consular services: notarials, depositions, visiting prisoners and so forth. And then the second year I moved over into visas. Visas have always dominated my consular managerial experience in the State Department, although some of my more interesting cases have been in the special consular services area.

I think the interesting thing at ConGen, and I kind of alluded to it before when we were talking about Haiti, is that at one point I had three students, all male, single males, who were going to Haiti and were all in consular training at the same time. And I thought, "Gosh, these guys are going to a place where I know there've been people who've already done prison time, officers, where there's constant fraud, and I just want these guys to go and not fall into some of the traps that others have fallen into." So I made sure to introduce them all to my husband, who was still my fiancé at the time. At least they would have one friend to whom they could address questions about Haitian society and so forth. And it's very interesting, because they were all impressive students. One eventually married a Haitian. The second one, I can't remember what exactly happened to him, but the third one, my husband called me only about three weeks after the fellow had arrived at post and said to me, "Honey, I went by X's house and if you don't mind,

I'm not going to go back again. He already has friends and they're not the kinds of people that I feel comfortable around." I said, "You're not under any obligation. I just thought these people might be lonely."

Well, it turns out that that individual was later, very shortly thereafter, arrested for selling visas. And it's very interesting, because the first hint was really my husband identifying that his friends were unsavory. The second hint came from my snitch, whom I alluded to before. He earned a living by going in and out of immigration and getting exit visas. At that time you had to have an exit and a reentry visa, even if you were Haitian. Just a moneymaker, it's no longer required. He noticed that two people who had allegedly just gotten visas had visas with different serial numbers, wildly different, and two different types of counterfoils. That was the old days, where you had an actual postage stamp type of seal that you put on the passport page and you stamped the visa over it. He called it to my husband's attention, who called it to my attention, and I called it to the CG's attention and her answer was, "Well, that happens from time to time."

Later it was discovered that there was an old cache of unused counterfoils in the bottom drawer of the safe and the vice consul had gotten the idea of taking those old ones and predating everything and at night he would come in and back up the numbers counter on the old Burroughs visa machine with a paperclip, you could simply move the numbers, so that the numbers resembled numbers that would indeed have been in use earlier, so that it could look like it was an older visa. The thing is that he was so flamboyant about it. Apparently he changed his *gourdes*, Haitian money, on the street to dollars, he kept his money in a safety deposit box in the casino, he was not in the least discreet. I don't know if it's true or not, but somebody said that on election night, when everybody was at the election night party or whatever, he was in there stamping dozens of visas. So he was eventually caught and prosecuted.

Q: That's interesting, you were still breaking up fraud rings in Haiti even after you were back in Washington.

GERSON: Well, I didn't really break it up but it sort of came to my attention.

Q: These were classes of what, about 30 students or so?

GERSON: Well, there were four to six per class that you kept constantly rotating, so there were probably 30 people going through ConGen at any one time, but they were in smaller units and they had a schedule that they rotated through with different activities throughout the day.

Q: What kind of advice were you giving them about visiting Americans in jail?

GERSON: Well, they actually had a role play for that and one of them had to act like a complete nutter out of his mind. Quite frequently you get prisoners who actually have some sort of emotional or psychological problem as well as their criminal problem. I think the thing is to be non-judgmental, but at the same time you can't go overboard and

defend them either. You have to make it very clear at the beginning that you're there to help them have a comfortable and productive incarceration or, if they haven't been tried yet, a fair trial. Quite frequently you would actually feed them, there would be food supplements because things weren't up to U.S standards in all prisons.

Q: And those were provided by the embassy or did you just bake them cookies?

GERSON: Oh, you can do that, as well, but there are funds that can actually be loaned to the prisoners, or made available, to buy vitamin supplements and staples, because in a lot of poorer countries prisoners are in fact fed and clothed by their families, but the American doesn't have a family there.

Q: Yeah, it can be pretty grim. So you found this a rewarding job?

GERSON: Yes, quite rewarding. I enjoyed it very much and I also participated as an instructor occasionally in seminars out in the field – traveling seminars, that would include somebody from CA, somebody from ConGen and somebody from VO, the Visa Office, and consular officers from throughout the region. I participated in workshops in the Dominican Republic and Vienna. I can't remember whether I did them when I worked in CA or whether I did them in ConGen. So that was kind of interesting, too, because you actually kept abreast of more recent legislation or best practices, you got to take those out to the field and meet with groups of officers who were actually working out in the field.

Q: I guess it was a perfect place to meet all the young consular officers and decide who you wanted to recruit in the future.

GERSON: Absolutely, and the funny thing is that my last job, my final job, as an inspector, I was inspecting places where many of my former students were DCMs, if not ambassadors. So I had known them way back when.

Q: And this was a one-year assignment?

GERSON: Two years, a full two-year assignment. And after that, much to the chagrin of my CDO, I went to Antigua. My CDO said, "That's not a very career enhancing place." It was a five-American post, one was a secretary, and very small, the smallest post in the Western Hemisphere and of course on an island eight miles by ten. But for some reason I preferred that to the Dominican Republic. I can't remember whether my husband played a role in that, preferring to go off the island of Hispaniola to visit me rather than to stay on the same island but for whatever reason I prevailed and went to Antigua, while my CDO thought the Dominican Republic would have been much better.

Q: And this was a full-fledged embassy?

GERSON: It was a full-fledged embassy, albeit quite small.

Q: With an ambassador?

GERSON: No, the ambassador was in Barbados. The principal officer was sort of the equivalent of a DCM, with a very, very difficult relationship with the embassy. Not only the ambassador that was in Barbados when I initially arrived but apparently the one prior to him also had had this very difficult relationship with the principal officer in Antigua, wanting somehow to control everything that went on in the northern Antilles and not wanting to leave a lot of representation and demarches and everything to the principal officer, who of course knew everybody. I remember at one point the ambassador, who was a political appointee, and I know he was a friend of Trent Lott's, came to visit us and we had a little meeting of the entire American staff, around a coffee table and he said, "I really don't want anybody going and speaking to a cabinet minister or the prime minister, nobody, without getting their talking points cleared in Barbados."

And I said, "Okay, I'm supposed to go the baptism of the minister of education's new son. I guess I'll have to put in talking points. My next-door neighbor is the deputy prime minister. I see him every day. My dog attends his cocktail parties uninvited. How can I not talk to people that I see in the supermarket?"

This was a very, very small society, where if you want to sell your car, you put an ad in the newspaper with only the license plate number. You just say "P3026 for sale" and people know who it belongs to. I'm not joking.

The ambassador just had no idea that we had those levels of access. His restriction was very unrealistic. Bajans are less open than Antiguans, and of course the other islands in the Antigua district, St. Kitts-Nevis, Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, Montserrat, whenever I went to Anguilla the entire government took me to lunch. I was there when the first shuttle crashed and we were having lunch and somebody rushed in and sort of whispered to the chief minister, who got very visibly disturbed and he said, "Our shuttle has crashed." Our shuttle! Since when does Anguilla participate in the U.S. space program! But they felt a real kinship with the U.S.

I think the Barbados embassy failed to understand that we had such a close relationship with government folks in our district.

Q: So even out of Antigua you had other islands that you were covering?

GERSON: That's right. For example, my most notorious prisoner, a murderer who was also wanted for murder in the States, was on Tortola, so I was constantly going there. It seemed like every accident we had was in Anguilla, which was just beginning to become the home of the rich and famous. Now it's got all these luxury hotels, but we would have private planes that would crash into telephone wires, things like that that would happen to Americans. Island people traveled to the U.S. Virgin Islands just to see their doctor. So you were often issuing visas just for people to go that far. There were people who had their weekly music lessons in U.S. territory.

Anguillans are island people. There were no street addresses. So you knew that your social security beneficiary was Shorty Gumbs or Theophilus Gumbs, that was his nickname, or Fisherman Gumbs or whatever. So we learned a lot about that island, just trying to find people, all with the same surname and identifiable by the nicknames in most cases.

It was a very interesting tour, a very different way of working. We had poor communications. We had no e-mail or commo centers like you have today, with cables coming in. We relied on a small navy base there to bring in our cables. So you had to go and get them, and it wasn't every day.

I remember one day I headed out to the airport in my VW Beetle to pick up what I thought was one official visitor, the medical officer, and of course I had something like between seven and nine official visitors arriving on that flight, none of whom we were aware we were even going to meet and assist.

Q: And they outnumbered the embassy staff.

GERSON: So it was very challenging, plus the large number of American tourists, older tourists, on cruise ships and things, doing snorkeling for the first time, doing whatever, we had a lot of deaths. Quite challenging from a consular point of view and very interesting from a political point of view as well.

Q: Let me try to understand how the State Department was covering the Caribbean.

GERSON: Well, at that time Grenada was by itself. I think now it's under Barbados.

Q: Was that before or after the invasion?

GERSON: I think it was after the invasion.

Several of the islands, by the way, had U.S. medical schools, including St. Kitts. The Grenada phenomenon of having a medical school with a lot of American students was not unusual.

Embassy Bridgetown had the one ambassador for all of the islands that were encompassed under the Antigua embassy as well. All cables, if I recall, did not have to be cleared by Barbados before they went out, but a large number of them did. The ambassador would come up to Antigua and he would host functions, but the daily business of interacting with the governments in our district fell to us.

Q: So the ambassador would come over once every three or four months or something like that?

GERSON: Right, exactly. Previously, prior to Antigua's independence from England, there had been a consulate there, because travel is quite frequent from that area to the

southern U.S. and the U.S. islands. And then when Antigua became independent the consulate became an embassy and was upgraded and the building had been built and so forth, which was way too large for what we needed. I believe the foreign ministry is now in it.

Q: And what is the population of Antigua, or what was it at the time?

GERSON: It was a well-populated island, it was over 50,000 people.

Q: Okay, so 50,000 and the size of the island?

GERSON: Eight miles by ten.

Q: Eight by ten miles.

GERSON: And no road went straight to anywhere.

Q: But they were paved, anyway?

GERSON: More or less. Not all, but the main roads. You certainly didn't want to drive at night at any speed because of animals on the road. The cows and donkeys were not wearing florescent clothing or anything.

Q: So we're talking about an extremely small place.

GERSON: That's correct.

Q: And from there you also had responsibility for what, half a dozen other little islands?

GERSON: That's right.

Q: Some of which were independent and some were not?

GERSON: I flew about 40 times in the two years that I was there.

Q: And this would have been on these little six-seater kind of planes?

GERSON: Or sometimes even as big as the Dash 8, so maybe 40 seats. Like going to Montserrat, you could go on a big flight with maybe 12 passengers or you could go by Twin Otter or you could go on the little tiny plane. At one point I sat in the copilot's seat. You could see fish swimming below you.

So we covered Montserrat; St. Kitts and Nevis, which is one country, two islands; Anguilla, which belongs to England. It fought a war to remain a British dependency. I have the definitive history, it's about a quarter of an inch thick, on the six days "war" that it fought in order to remain dependent on England as opposed to becoming part of the

new St. Kitts-Nevis nation. There was Antigua and Barbuda, Barbuda is the second island, very barren, except for its beautiful pink sand beaches. It exports sand and lobsters; those are its two big products.

And then the British Virgins, which are a lot of islands. Most of our work was done on Tortola, which is where the capital is. That's where the prison is, that's where the government was.

Q: Now, are these countries members of the United Nations? Did you have to do demarches?

GERSON: Well, I was not the political officer but, yes, certainly I remember, we certainly did demarches. I don't remember too much about the UN. I remember it more from when I was working on UN issues. I think in New York, I think the Eastern Caribbean countries had a joint office because it was just becoming way too expensive for them to maintain individual presences.

The prime minister of Dominica, for example, Eugenia Charles, a woman prime minister, she was more likely to fly through Antigua than to go down to Barbados on her way to anywhere. We were always keeping her company at the airport. So some of the other English speaking Caribbean countries we interacted with anyway, even though they weren't in our district.

But, yes, we did do demarches. I remember at one point when our principal officer was gone for some reason I became the principal officer and we had one of these last minute, on Friday, must deliver in person, cannot be done by phone demarches, to the deputy prime minister. You never delivered anything to the prime minister, Vere Bird. The Bird family, I think you may have heard of the Bird family, historically had run this country from pre-independence. But, anyway, the father was not the person you would want to demarche. He was elderly, and decisions were made by others.

So, here I was given this instruction that I had to go in on a Friday afternoon to see the deputy prime minister. So I called up his Civil Service assistant and I said, "Eric, I've just got to see Lester. I'm in charge today and I've been told I have to do this." So I went down there and I waited and I got in and it was on some sort of inane thing that really did not require being demarched on a Friday afternoon. I remember when I came out, I went with the political officer, who was quite junior, he wanted me to go as the more senior person, I was an FS-03. Okay, on the way out I gave Eric Challenger, who was the senior civil servant, I gave him a hug. My colleague said, "I can't believe you did that." I said, "We're going to get access more easily from now on!" and we did.

Q: It must have been a pretty big airport there as well.

GERSON: Very large airport. I can't remember exactly why. There were a lot of cruise ships that came in there and it was where all the people flew from Miami and then rerouted to these smaller planes to take them to the outer islands, because certainly none

of those outer islands could accommodate large planes. Probably Anguilla can now accommodate larger planes, because it does have some of those very big, ritzy, very expensive hotels. Antigua had a very big airport.

Q: A lot of big hotels as well?

GERSON: They were still kind of small at that time, with a few exceptions, but now there are bigger ones. There's also an area, English Harbor, which is one of the biggest natural harbors in the world, with the St. James Club, very ritzy, Mill Reef Club, where people have these wonderful homes. You can't even get in, it's a gated community *par excellence*. I remember one day I was issuing a visa to an Italian, I believe he was Italian and the young American girl who was with him said, "My parents want to know if you want to come to a party on Friday night." I said, "Who and where?" Well, it was the Macys, as in the department stores, at the Mill Reef Club. Of course I went in my ancient VW Beetle. The only other people driving a car like that were the reggae band. The most magnificent homes, sometimes you climbed over the rocks, I once saw a butler serving somebody their Sunday brunch on a little table on the sand with a tablecloth. There were some incredibly wealthy foreign assets there.

Q: Mainly American?

GERSON: Mainly American, but British also.

Q: Now, as the American consul, you must have been high society again, like you were in Haiti?

GERSON: Yes, but there wasn't much high society. There were two other diplomatic representatives: the British and the Venezuelans, that's it. So there was really no diplomatic corps to speak of. The wealthy people were more or less the tourists, who came in and had their winter homes. Antiguans were very just normal people. Now I did have a lot of friends and I did go out a lot, but more things where you went out with your friends, lobster fishing, nearby islands, a little boat, water skiing, playing bridge. Tried to play golf, but the nine-hole golf course was more or less fit for a mountain goat.

Q: And beautiful beaches, no doubt.

GERSON: Right, beautiful beaches, but not a lot to do on the cultural side. There wasn't even a decent cinema. The movie theater, as I recall, played mainly kung fu things. But I had an incredible number of visitors there, because everybody wanted to take their beach vacation at my house. I was pretty busy with the inter-island travel and then with my own house guests.

Plus I would often have people who were flying out to meet the military ships. We had a lot of naval vessels calling at the outer islands, so sometimes the spouses would be able to meet them there and they wouldn't have anywhere to overnight in Antigua. You can't afford to stay in a country with $300-a-night hotels if you're the spouse of a military

person, overnighting to wait to get to Nevis. So I would host them at my home.

We used to get a list of proposed ports of call per quarter and we would say yea or nay, because not only did the ship come in but you have to chandler for it, you have to arrange all of their supplies. I remember once we got the list of the proposed ports of call and they had an aircraft carrier that was planning to come into Barbuda. Now Barbuda only had a thousand people. I sent a cable back and said, "Well, the island can pull up to the aircraft carrier but if you want four thousand gallons of chocolate milk you're not getting it in Barbuda." So they revised their plans. A lot of times the military planners didn't really have any idea what was available. You'd go out to the ships and you'd be piped aboard, you'd brief the sailors about where they shouldn't go. Of course they immediately went to those places. But all in all the U.S. crews were very well behaved, much better behaved and much more welcome in the islands than the British ships.

There's a lot of different activities.

Q: So a lot of naval visits. Those can be fun. Sometimes they bring their bands.

GERSON: Exactly and you'd always get to go on the ships, the ships would have open houses for the residents, people of all sorts would flood on and take a look around. You could have guests that you invited, kind of representational, and the ship paid for it, which was nice.

Q: And relations with the United States were very good?

GERSON: Very good.

Now all of these islands have problems with money laundering. There are a lot of problems in the banking system on all the islands. Certainly St. Kitts has had a lot of recent problems. Antigua did as well. There were always banks that were a bit suspect, and my political/econ colleagues spent a little more time on that issue, but I sometimes did, too, because if you were traveling to an island you looked after a number of things at the same time.

Q: Were they setting themselves up as banking centers like the Caymans and that sort of thing?

GERSON: Exactly.

Politics is nothing if not self-interested in these little places.

Q: Of course. And did you have the same kind of visa fraud problems you had in Haiti?

GERSON: Very little. Most people only went as far as Puerto Rico or the Virgin Islands. They were definitely island people at the time, particularly Montserratians. Of course, everything changed for them when their volcano erupted. Those people would never have

lived anywhere else.

I don't know what it's like now, but we didn't have a huge refusal rate. We did refuse visas, but there were also a lot of people from other islands working in Antigua, for example, because of the attraction of the larger hotels. We didn't know as much about Dominicans and St. Lucians.

Q: If you had an American who died on another island, say, did you have to fly over for the occasion?

GERSON: Not always. We had very good contacts, and we were able to usually get the bodies back to the States without a consular mortuary certificate. That would be something that would have to be signed or sometimes you could just send it, we did not have to go. But most of the deaths were, in fact, in Antigua itself.

Q: And were the cruise ships pretty good about that, if it was a passenger?

GERSON: Yes, very good.

We had some horrible things that happened. I remember one day a woman wearing a bathing suit, with just a tee shirt over it and sand all over her came into the office weeping. The embassy is right next door to the hospital, which was kind of a frightening place, they medevaced us for broken legs. She was on her honeymoon and it was the first day of their honeymoon and her husband ran into the ocean and jumped in headfirst and hit a sandbar and broke his neck and had to lie there for an hour to two hours before an ambulance came. Then they took him to this hospital and she just didn't know what to do. I called the hospital, an Indian doctor that I didn't know but he was obviously there on a kind of exchange program or whatever, was dealing with the case and he said, "I have to put a screw and a pulley in his skull. I have to try to pull his neck out, because if I don't, he cannot right now move any of his limbs. He will be paralyzed for life. It's my only hope to save maybe his arms."

So she asked me what to do. Here she is, married one day and she's married to somebody who could conceivably be a quadriplegic. We're not encouraged to give personal advice, and how can you really in such a case. So we talked about it and she said, "Well, tell him to go ahead." And he did and the next day the guy moved his hands, but he never regained, as I understand from following up, never regained use of his legs. And then we had to organize his medevac, in a special medevac helicopter, but only after he was stable. They had to take a mold of his body and all sorts of things that had to be organized with us transmitting information.

We had some pretty horrific cases. One day a cruise ship had just disgorged a number of its older passengers and they were walking along the wharfside. They didn't realize that a truck was backing up, because it didn't have the beep-beep-beeping that we have here. It was backing up and it ran right over one of the ladies and it squashed her legs. She wasn't killed. There she is, already in her late 70s, in this hospital, her son calling me from the

States. I would visit her every day. Eventually he came down and she was fine, but these things are just never routine.

Q: Yeah, so it's not all fun and games to be on a little Caribbean island.

GERSON: No, absolutely not. People would often come to me and say, "Oh, we want to live here." They had come down on a package tour deal. And I'd say, "Have you rented a car and driven through the center of the country? Have you really looked at what the grocery stores are like, what your choices are? Have you thought about what it would be like to live where you can never drive more than ten miles in any direction?"

Q: I can relate to a lot of this, since my first assignment was Fiji. We had the same kind of island thing, with some different twists.

GERSON: I loved it. I made a lot of friends and once I made friends I was sorry to leave it after two years.

Q: Nice housing? On the beach?

GERSON: No, it was not on the beach. Nobody was on the beach. No Antiguan lives on the beach, because of hurricanes, but it was near a beach, you could see the beach from your street.

Q: Did you have hurricanes while you were?

GERSON: Not at all and it hardly ever rains, but when it rains, when there is a hurricane, there's been some severe damage, but not while I was there.

Q: It's a flat island?

GERSON: Quite flat. Little hills only.

Q: Anything else on Antigua?

GERSON: Not that I can think of, except that we had a very interesting principal officer, who wrote the most incredibly colorful cables. He would write cables about going to church in Barbuda, for example, and the cable would be 20 pages long and it would be full of flowery descriptions. We all just sort of died of embarrassment at first, but the one interesting thing was, everybody in the Department looked forward to them, because they were so outrageous. Everybody loved them. Although I'm not sure that's why he wrote them the way he did, it certainly got a readership about our islands and their issues.

Q: Do you remember who that was?

GERSON: I certainly do. His name was Bob DuBose.

Q: And he didn't have to clear those with the ambassador before he sent them?

GERSON: I don't know. I don't think so. I don't think he did.

Q: Those can be great fun to write, depending what you have to write about and if you actually have a readership for it.

GERSON: Right, well, the readership developed, probably because initially somebody initially said, "Oh, my God! What is this?" But I do know from talking to people in the Department, when you got an Antigua cable you always put it aside to read that later, because it was going to be entertaining.

Q: But no great political developments?

GERSON: There weren't. There was always this dynasty in charge, so there was always some sort of monitoring of any valid opposition. Little political struggles in these different places, but of no import in relation to other areas of the world, really.

Q: How about State Department visitors?

GERSON: I can't recall getting very many of a high level.

Q: Other than the eight medical officers?

GERSON: There was only one medical officer. Those were all people that were, let's say an RSO (regional security officer) coming to look, because we didn't have one or a communicator looking at the equipment.

Q: You didn't have cabinet secretaries coming down for vacation or anything like that, or congressmen deciding they needed to do island tourism?

GERSON: There may have been the odd one, but I don't recall that being a big burden.

Q: This was from, what, '85 to '87?

GERSON: '85 to '87.

Q: You thought about extending, or was two years enough on the island?

GERSON: You know, that was just when they decided to make the tours three years, so I could've extended but I thought, "Two years, I think it's enough here."

Q: Is that regarded as a hardship post? Was it a differential post?

GERSON: I think there was a small differential, because of the island fever, the lack of medical resources, I personally was just fine there. I don't usually go that far from my

home on a given day anyway, and I don't need to have a huge shopping mall. And I read a lot. And that was, by the way, where I was tuning in the TV one day and I saw Bernie Fennell being arrested on nationwide TV.

Q: You picked up American TV there?

GERSON: Yes.

Q: That's a nice plus as well, then.

GERSON: I want to say it was CNN, but I don't know if we had CNN back then. But something that I put on and there was the commentator, talking about visa fraud in Madrid and then it showed Bernie being handcuffed and led out of the section and of course I was kind of overcome, because it was somebody that I learned everything that I knew from.

I guess one more thing I want to say about Antigua, when I arrived, I was told before I arrived, "Don't throw anything away, Leslie. DS (diplomatic security) will be there in a week or two." Because they were in fact investigating someone who had been there before I arrived.

You asked about visa fraud. I don't think I want to say too much about it, except to say that prior to my arrival, for the previous two or three years, there had been hundreds of visas issued to Koreans in Antigua. From the time I arrived until the time I left there was only one Korean couple that ever made their way to Antigua. And when I said, "What are you doing here?" they said, "Well, we were told this is the place to come and get your visa." I said, "Too late!"

So there was clearly something going on there but nothing was ever, I know it was investigated but I don't believe anything was ever proven. It's very hard, I think the standards of evidence are tough. But I am sure there had been fraud.

Q: Speaking to you, I'm getting the impression for the first time that our consular service is rife with corruption.

GERSON: Well, I don't think you can say that.

Q: I hope that's an overstatement.

GERSON: I think it is an overstatement. I happen to have gone to countries like Haiti, where the demand is there. Even in England the demand was from a subgroup, the Jamaicans. You're not usually going to find English people trying to bribe an embassy employee. So sometimes it's part and parcel of where you've gone for your assignments.

Q: What do visas sell for when people buy them?

GERSON: I have no idea. I think at the time that I was in Haiti, I had heard around 2000 to 2500 dollars.

Q: So that's real money!

GERSON: I have no idea now.

Q: So, you started bidding for new places?

GERSON: I did, but, again, that was kind of an easy thing. I went back to CA/EX, the executive office of the Bureau of Consular Affairs.

Q: Which is what you wanted to do?

GERSON: Which is what I wanted to do. I was a management analyst and that was extremely interesting, because, for the first time, I was able to put together management of consular work on a macro level rather than on a micro level, because my portfolio included all of the Western Hemisphere. So I was looking at matching resources: you do 100,000 visas a year in one post but you have 18 officers doing the work and another post does 70,000 and you only have seven officers doing the work. Now what's the difference here?

Also, the thing that really marked my tour in CA/EX, I had only been there a couple of weeks when Ron Somerville, who was the executive director and that's basically why I bid on the job, because he was so renowned, of course he left like two months after I arrived. But he called me into his office on a Friday afternoon. He said, "I want you to think about the following: we want to centralize all immigrant visas in Mexico on the border, in Ciudad Juarez, and we want to replace Foreign Service officers with Civil Service people who live along the border, in the U.S., who speak Spanish already. I would like you to develop the timeline, all the steps we have to take, and what the money and position savings would be."

Q: That's certainly a two-year project!

GERSON: I went home and I cried. I didn't even know what we were talking about. And I did something on the weekend, maybe a three-page paper and on Monday he said, "This is a good start, but now let's talk about how to flesh it out." Within one year the project was complete.

Q: That sounds like a very long-term kind of project.

GERSON: CA extended the concept of the Civil Service employees after my tour in CA/EX ended. Originally these people were only doing immigrant visas and they were very carefully selected. They all came to ConGen to be trained and I mentored all of them. I called them the Juarez wonders. Some of them are still at the consulate, and I still remain in touch with one or two. But subsequently this program was broadened to doing

NIVs and to processing border crossing cards and then there were some internal control problems.

Q: It was only IVs originally?

GERSON: That's right. All of the IV applicants were going to come to Ciudad Juarez. That's a tremendous number of IV paper applications and even thinking about how you're going to pack them up and how you're going to move them and what kind of file cabinets you need and where are you going to house this and how many people are going to have to process these, because IVs were being done in several other places in Mexico and all of this had to be consolidated

Q: What was the advantage of consolidating it in one place?

GERSON: Well, you could replace Foreign Service officers with Civil Service employees, because in El Paso, Texas, you had this incredible number of Civil Service people who could not normally go above a GS-7 grade. There just wasn't anything available. They could just commute across the border, you wouldn't have to pay housing.

Q: So they would actually work at the consulate?

GERSON: That's right. They crossed the border every day.

Q: And live in El Paso?

GERSON: That's right. You could actually offer them a career ladder that was much better than what was available at that time.

The second thing is, all of the Mexicans, or 90 percent of the Mexicans who were going to be interviewed were coming south for their interviews anyway. They were already in the States. They were not living in Mexico City, Monterrey, these places. So it just made a lot of sense.

Q: That's different. I assumed that if they were going to consolidate, Mexico City would have been the logical place.

GERSON: But the clients were all coming south. So they just crossed the border and crossed right back. So you had a number of advantages. There are a lot of economies of scale when you do everything in one place.

Q: So this was a success story?

GERSON: It was, at the time.

Q: And you said then it was expanded to include non-immigrant visas.

GERSON: It was expanded over the years to include NIVs, and then CA ran into some problems and some aspects of processing were contracted out to other groups. The number of officers managing the process remained quite small, too small for the huge amount of work that was taken on, and then were some investigations into fraud. I think it was a sound decision for what it was meant to be. You can see that. I just was down there, not this summer but the summer before, doing a study of non-consular staffing on the border, so I was able to look at the program and it still works well, but the standards were not kept as high, I think, over the years, of recruiting, and people lost touch with Washington. It began to be something that you did locally and I think employees didn't buy in as much to the Foreign Service and feel as much part of the Foreign Service as they had initially. That's just my opinion.

Q: So did you spend a lot of time actually in the consulates down there along the border as you developed this?

GERSON: No. I had gone down there a couple of times, but it was all developed by phone.

Q: And recruiting people, these were people who were already civil servants?

GERSON: Mostly. It was a broad call. But I think at the beginning, I would say out of the initial maybe eight all but one probably already were working for either the INS, the Veterans Administration, or some other agency.

Q: And you said the fellow who asked you to develop this left almost immediately after dumping this in your lap?

GERSON: This happens to me all the time. The first time that that happened to me was in CA/EX. It happened later with Harold Koh when John Shattuck invited me to take a DAS job and then left. You come to work with somebody and then you get somebody else instead.

Q: But in this case the project obviously had been endorsed by the successor as well?

GERSON: That made it a very interesting job for me, because we recovered all of these positions and we recovered money and with a little bit of smoke and mirrors CA kept all of those resources. So when another post in Latin America needed additional positions I had them to give out. I could analyze and decide, yes, you need somebody. So I became a very popular analyst, because it's not always that you actually have resources or money to give a post.

Q: And ARA was able to hold on to these positions, even?

GERSON: That's right. I worked very closely with them.

Q: So they didn't go off to Russia or something?

GERSON: Exactly.

Q; Good work! What kind of office was it? How many people were in it?

GERSON: I think there were three management analysts at the time. Now there are something like seven or eight.

Q: Covering dozens of posts.

GERSON: That's right, but we didn't have the former Soviet Union posts yet and a lot of the posts hadn't grown to the size they are now.

Q: You were covering the entire Western Hemisphere?

GERSON: That's right, minus Canada, because that was part of EUR (the Bureau of European Affairs) at the time, plus I covered consular design. So all the new consular sections that were being designed, I worked with OBO (then FBO) and looked at blueprints and said, "No, this needs another interview window." I remember once I was even flown out to Houston with a team to talk with architects at the very beginning on an embassy construction project.

Q: That's interesting. I suppose a lot of the people who are doing that had no idea how a consular section is supposed to work.

GERSON: That's right. Now there are standards for what size each desk should be, what size each window should be, but then it was much less refined.

We also did training. I covered consular agencies as well and oversaw the first review of the salary levels for the consular agents. It's been redone a couple of times since then, but that was the first time. I organized meetings with all of the consular agents for their training. So we had, in addition to our geographic portfolio, we also had other portfolios. Then at one point the EUR portfolio was vacant, so I did that at the same time. It was very interesting.

Q: Let me ask you about consular agents. That's something you don't hear very much about. How many of these people are there out there?

GERSON: I don't know. There were about 40 at the time. I think there's even more now. I think there may be almost 20 in Mexico alone.

Usually consular agents focus on American citizen services. They do not do visas. They also often do some commercial work and some public relations work for the embassy. So they're almost always in places that have heavy concentrations of either American residents or American tourists. That's why you find them in Cancun, Cozumel, Oaxaca, places where Americans are.

Q: Are these often are people who had been Foreign Service?

GERSON: No. They're usually resident in that country. If there's not good American representation there, they're locals who have some ties to the States or were educated here or whatever, business people, usually with good connections in that city.

Q: So we have non-Americans doing it?

GERSON: Occasionally. So their job is really to make sure that they know everybody who's anybody, so if something happens to an American they can immediately get hold of the police commissioner or the funeral home or whatever and hold down the fort, if a consular officer's going to come out. Even in the event an officer is not coming out, they know how to provide all the services. Each one reports to an embassy or a consulate.

Q: This is not a fulltime job?

GERSON: It can be up to 90 percent of their time, but sometimes it's only 20 percent of time. That's based on an analysis of what the demand is and sometimes it changes.

Q: And these are not political appointees?

GERSON: No.

Q: I could see where somebody being the American consular agent in Cancun might seem like a nice little job to have.

GERSON: I think someone who was in Cancun actually, at one point, became a consular officer, after a number of years. But for example, the consular agency in Nice, he or she has two or three FSNs and they're busier in some ways, on the American citizens side, they're busier than Marseilles, which is the full service consulate that they report to.

Q: And these are not career positions, I suppose. People get a contract for a certain number of years at a time?

GERSON: Yes, but many of them stay for years and years.

Q: I suppose once they've done it they have the advantage of experience and so forth.

How did you find that CA fit into the Department? Were you kind of your own empire, or were you interacting a lot with other bureaus?

GERSON: Well, I certainly interacted an awful lot with ARA (former name of the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs) at the time. I really don't know at the higher level. I know on the budget side we interacted a lot and also on information resource management. I think anybody will tell you that the Department today is where it is on

technology largely because of CA, because CA had the money to develop new technologies, especially after I left there, when we were authorized to keep the consular fees. CA brought the Department along with it in some technological areas. So I think now there are excellent relationships with a number of bureaus. I just was pretty focused at that point on my own, although we did have a good relationship with OBO and certainly I had a good relationship with the regional bureau, or bureaus when I had to work with more than one.

Joan Clark was the Assistant Secretary at the time. She'd been a former Director General of the Foreign Service, I think, or maybe she became the Director General afterwards. She was not a consular officer. She was an admin/management officer.

But I think we were pretty well integrated.

Q: And well regarded, as well, you think?

GERSON: I think so, but better regarded now.

Q: And support from the top when you needed it for something or other? Now I have the impression, just for example, that CA is under siege. It's their fault that terrorists are getting into the United States, these kinds of things.

GERSON: Well, there are those who think that this is simply the result of needing to have a fall guy and better it be a lower level person than a higher level person.

Q: That, of course, but was that also a phenomenon of the time, all these illegal immigrants and it's the State Department's fault and it's CA's fault?

GERSON: Not really. I don't recall hearing a lot of that. Sometimes they run into that with individual immigration inspectors at the border, but I don't recall being blamed for anything at the time.

Q: So for you this was a good assignment, which allowed you to use your management skills in a broader context and to understand the Department a little bit?

GERSON: That's right and manage a large pot of money, too.

Q: This was your first job that was actually in the building, if you want to call it that. Or was it in the building?

GERSON: It was in the building, yes, at the time. It's not now; it's in an annex across the street. And then from there I went to become a senior watch officer. There I learned other aspects of the Department.

Q: Now, before we get to that, have we finished the CA/EX period?

GERSON: I think so, pretty much.

Q: The watch officer job, now, this would be something, once again, you have to apply for in the bidding cycle?

GERSON: That's something that you usually have to have some sort of a recommendation for. This wasn't the watch officer, this was the SWO (senior watch officer). I can't remember exactly how I got that, but I did.

Q: And that's shift work, right?

GERSON: It is and I was known as the disaster SWO. This was the year that every single one of the Eastern European governments fell, that the Wall fell.

Q: Which year are we talking about, now?

GERSON: This is '89 to '90. And we also invaded Panama. And all of these things occurred on my watch. It was like a joke. I remember that I came in one morning, the early shift, the shift that would start around seven or eight. I always got in early, so it was around 6:00, 6:30 and the handoff SWO says to me, "Oh, good. You're here. In five minutes we're invading Panama!"

It became very amusing. I would have Shirley Temple Black on the phone telling me, "I can see them going down the street! There they are! They're shooting!"

And then somebody else, I think it was the chargé in Lebanon, was sent two conflicting instructions, this is 3:00 a.m. and I'm on a special telephone. The chargé is asking whether to destroy something or not. I have to decide whether I'm going to wake up the Secretary or wake up an Assistant Secretary or whether I'm going to tell him what to do. And I decided what to do and told him. In the middle of the night, you are in fact the officer in charge of the State Department.

Just like I was the mental case officer in London, I was the disaster SWO.

Q: Back up a second and tell me a little bit about the organization of the watch center at that point.

GERSON: At that time there was a senior watch officer, there were several of us, because of the different shifts. When I first started, Kristie Kenney and Joe Mussomelli were both SWOs with me. At any rate, the senior watch officer was assisted by usually second or third tour officers including a watch officer, who was the first person that usually picked up the phone, an editor/assistant watch officer who would pull together pieces of information and prepare a product that would be given to the ExecSec at the end of the watch period, and an OA (operations officer) who would help with xeroxing and transmitting cables and so forth.

Q: There would usually be a military person there as well.

GERSON: There was always a military person in a separate office and you could liaise with him or her as needed. And there were often the nuclear risk people off to one side as well, and if you had a disaster of any sort working, then you would have the people on the task force that you had to liaise with and make sure they got out their products and that you cleared them and so forth.

Of course, you always had at the end of the day, if you were on that shift, people rushing in with cables to be cleared. A lot of times they would go home and you would have the cable and not all the clearers had approved it yet. You'd literally put the little tape across original text and type in the changes when a cable was actually in a hard copy and you'd get the cable out once all the clearances were in. And if a NIACT (night action immediate) cable needed to go out, you'd decide whether it would go out then or whether it could be an opening of business NIACT--all of those kinds of things.

And then of course you patched together phone conversations. So if the Secretary wanted to talk to Nelson Mandela, which happened while I was there, you had to know the protocol of who came on first, who waited for whom, and sometimes you would take notes. You would always ask, "Do you want me to stay on the line?" because sometimes you were the note taker for the conversation. Sometimes they'd say, "No, I don't want anyone to be listening to this," so you'd drop off and you'd make sure all your team dropped off. But if you were taking notes, you had to then write them up and prepare a little memcon (memorandum of conversation), so that in the morning the official who had the conversation could look at it.

So a lot of those kinds of things happen at night on the watch, but are done by others during the day.

Q: That must be quite a nerve center there. Now you were working shifts, meaning eight hours at a time? Sometimes it would be a day shift and sometimes the late night?

GERSON: That's right. Sometimes there was not a lot to do in the late night. You'd find the team with their heads down, waiting for something to happen. My personal favorite was swing shift. It was the least disruptive to your sleep pattern. It was also when all the cables went out, so you usually got a good overview of all Department activities at the end of the day. And when you were finished at twelve o'clock there was no principal to debrief, because the ExecSec wasn't there. Whereas, with either of the other two shifts, when you were finished you had to go in and brief the ExecSec on activities and answer questions. So swing shift was really quite nice.

Q: And despite all the high pressure that must have been there from time to time, at least it was eight hours and when the time was up somebody else came in and took over.

GERSON: Absolutely. And many interesting things went on there and sometimes you'd get a big laugh. There was a special drop line that came from the Secretary's house, so

when you got that you would, when you saw that he was going to want to speak to somebody important, you would end up having to find out how to contact that person. One night the Secretary said, "I'm trying to write something about Japan. What's the population there?" So I said, "I'll get right back to you." We had a few little reference books. We didn't have google like we do now. There was some old almanac and it had the population of Japan with a growth rate. So we put our little mathematical heads together and I called the Secretary back and I said, "Well, factoring in population growth it has to be more or less x." He said, "Well, that's good."

Once at 4:00 a.m. there was a call from the Secretary. "Leslie, my watch has stopped. What time is it?"

So sometimes it went from the sublime to the mundane.

Q: So now you were on a first name basis with Jim Baker?

GERSON: That's right. You answered the phone "Leslie Gerson" so they knew who it was. It wasn't that he would have recognized me anywhere, but he knew the names of the SWOs.

Q: Just checking that you're on the job tonight?

Let's talk about a couple of these things that you mentioned. You had the revolutions in Eastern Europe. You're finally getting the Eastern European experience you wanted. So a lot of this would have happened after hours.

GERSON: That's right, because of the time difference.

Q: So you're there. Obviously, when something happens even before you send a cable you pick up the phone to the Ops Center and you were at the other end.

GERSON: And you have to decide what to do with that. Are they just giving you information? Do you have to decide whether to wake somebody up to tell them this or is that going to be counterproductive? Is it something really so bad that you have to organize a task force? What do you have to do with this information?

Q: Well, pick one, one of the revolutions you were on duty for.

GERSON: Well, most of the revolutions, what you did is take the information they provided. For example, when Shirley Temple Black called, what she saw out her window.

Q: What was she seeing?

GERSON: I think she saw masses of people and then the police were, let's say, roughing them up, or whatever. Then you would write a little memorandum of conversation and

you'd summarize it very briefly in your product that you would give to the ExecSec to be distributed throughout the Department in the morning. But you had that larger memcon that you'd be able to hand over with a great deal more information. That's what you normally did with it.

Q: Now you would have the decision at this point, after speaking to Shirley Temple Black, of waking up the Secretary if it was important enough, or probably more likely the Assistant Secretary and let him or her make the decision whether to wake the Secretary or not?

GERSON: As I recall there weren't a lot of things that we woke people up for, because usually the staff assistants or even sometimes the Assistant Secretaries themselves would give you a call or drop by to see you before they went home, tell you what they were looking for, tell you what they expected to happen, give you a head's up as to what they wanted to be advised of or not.

Q: But the revolutions in Eastern Europe, this was earthshaking kind of stuff.

GERSON: It was, but it was kind of ongoing. It didn't happen at 8:00 p.m. and they were done at 9:00. You had days of activity.

Q: How about the invasion of Panama?

GERSON: That, of course, nobody needed to be woken up. That did happen during the day, so, again, apart from knowing that it was happening and there was a task force set up and so forth, I didn't have to advise anybody. All the relevant layers were already at work.

Every once in a while you'd be asked to convene a multi-agency phone conversation on something, to take a decision, usually on a captured boat. We often did that when boats were caught in some nation's waters, you always had to have a conference call. But you could also convene a multi-agency call for other purposes.

Q: Capturing boats which were pirates?

GERSON: No, for example a U.S. boat that strays into Ecuadorian waters or a boat from another country that strays into U.S. waters and you need to decide what to do with it. You knew exactly whom to call. But sometimes you would talk with other agencies as well about what was happening on some other issue, other than a seizure.

As I recall, on the invasion of Panama, apart from being told that it was going to occur on my shift, I don't recall having to prepare any guidance or anything.

Q: It was over by the time the end of the day came around.

There's so much going on all over the world all the time and all of this is not all flowing

through the Ops Center, certainly.

GERSON: No, but you do watch CNN and other news all the time up there.

Q: So you can see what's going on and you're getting the main cables, but generally you don't take action on anything there unless it's NIACT Immediate or unless somebody telephones you or what's the trigger for you to leap in there?

GERSON: Usually it's that you would read either a reporting cable coming in that has a high priority and appears to be something new that you think somebody needs to know first thing in the morning, you might summarize that or decide whether you need to tell somebody before they just read it in the course of the day. The second thing would be any fast breaking news item that you think people might not be watching, because it's 2:00 a.m. and you could pick up through the news. The third thing would be phones calls, because sometimes it's a call about a death or something that you need to connect to an action officer right away.

Sometimes you would get phone calls from a port of entry, somebody had arrived with an expired visa and you had to get concurrence from a visa duty officer. There are duty officers for this in the Bureau of Consular Affairs and you'd have to put those people together and get that done.

So usually you're responding to something that is emerging.

Q: And lots of hours of just sitting there watching CNN as well?

GERSON: On the weekends and the late nights, yes, you could have some pretty slow periods.

Q: Did you have task forces that were working there while you were there?

GERSON: When the East European changes of government were going on, I'm sure there was a task force. Whenever there was a task force they had to liaise with you, keep you up to date, and prepare a task force report regularly for the SWO's clearance.

Q: And when you did your end of shift reports it was with the Department's Executive Secretary usually?

GERSON: Yes.

Q: Did you have direct contact with principals sometimes as well?

GERSON: Yes, principals would often call or even come by at the end of the day and talk to you. I got to meet a lot of people that I wouldn't otherwise have met.

Q: Any interesting conversations that you listened in on that are not still classified?

GERSON: I do remember the Mandela one. I don't remember the conversation, but I remember that Margaret Tutwiler did not like her conversations being monitored.

Q: You're not the White House operator. If the Secretary calls and says, 'Get me Nelson Mandela!' how do you do that?

GERSON: You have information about how to get most of these people.

Q: There was a big rolodex someplace?

GERSON: Sort of. And if you didn't know and you had to call another agency to find out, that's what you did, because they all have 24-hour operations as well.

Q: And does the same thing go in the other direction? Would you get a call from Nelson Mandela?

GERSON: You could.

Q: So, a very fascinating time, really seeing how the Department works at the top level.

GERSON: Right. It was quite interesting.

Q: It's a one-year assignment?

GERSON: One-year assignment.

Q: Because it's shift work and fairly intensive, I suppose?

GERSON: I don't know that you need to do it more than one year in order to learn everything and be productive.

Q: Understand what's going on, yeah.

GERSON: Some people, like Kristie, moved on and became the deputy and then eventually director of the watch. But actually staying to be a watch officer for more than one year, I haven't heard of that.

Q: Yeah, I don't think that I have, either, although I think I've heard of people going from the lower level watch officer and later being the senior one because they liked it.

GERSON: Now during the time that you were able to sit back and talk with your team, one of those late night talks actually determined my next assignment, because in fact when I started on the watch you already were bidding for the assignment following it. I was an FS-01, so I had bid on jobs in Montreal, Paris and way down on my list was El Salvador, but it was on the bid list. One of my watch officers, who's now our ambassador

to Guyana, Dave Robinson, had come out of El Salvador. That was his first tour, or second, but I think it was his first. He was always talking about El Salvador, El Salvador, El Salvador. The more I listened to him talk about this place, the more it sounded to me like Haiti when I had been there. I enjoyed that experience and I said, "I think I might want to be assigned there." And I asked him, "What are the pros and cons?"

And he said to me, "Well, the ambassador, you're either going to like him and he's going to like you or not, but he has a close circle of people that he's brought there that he's worked with before. And if you a fit into that circle it'll be great, you'll have every sort of opportunity. If you can't fit in it won't be as great an assignment."

So I called up my CDO and I said, "I'd like to move El Salvador to the top of my list." I remember I had this problem with Spanish, because I had taken classes for a few weeks in it early in the morning several years earlier, when I thought I might want to bid on the Dominican Republic. But that was eight years previously, and I had never used the language. So here I am bidding on a Spanish-speaking job, I got a 3/3 very hurriedly in early morning Spanish, the equivalent of five weeks of regular classes, eight years earlier, but I had never used it. So I said to my CDO, "If I moved El Salvador to the top of my list" and he said, "We'll panel you tomorrow." So I realized that there were no bidders, so it looked like I was it. And that's what determined my next assignment, my listening to this fellow talk about El Salvador when we had quiet moments on the watch.

Q: And you decided to do it. This would have been about…

GERSON: 1990, the summer of 1990.

Q: You're assigned to El Salvador. Is this right in the middle of the war?

GERSON: One year of war, the last year of war, one year of ceasefire and one year of peace. That was an extraordinary time to be there.

Q: So when you went there a full-fledged war was still ongoing?

GERSON: Right. There were a number of people who like to serve in these war zones, sort of cowboy types, always are and always will be. But my colleague had just talked about how wonderful the people were. And I had met a friend while I was traveling many years earlier – I'd lost touch with by that time – a Swiss girl, who had married a Salvadoran. I remembered meeting him and I remembered her showing these pictures of El Salvador when they went on their honeymoon. Now this was way before any of these problems and the war had begun. That just stuck with me, about how much she had enjoyed that country, and I matched that with what Dave Robinson told me and I thought this was the place for me to go.

Q: Even though it was a war zone?

GERSON: Correct.

Q: Was it a dangerous war zone for somebody living in the capital city?

GERSON: Well, when you'd be out after work, you always were careful not to park your car, in my case it was still the VW Beetle, near any telephone poles or electrical poles. And if you started to hear explosions you usually went home from the event, because the guerillas were always strapping explosives to these utility poles and causing them to topple over, and then that caused electrical problems and phone problems and a disruption of utilities. There would be a lot of very violent demonstrations in the street.

The embassy, at the time that I arrived there, was still downtown, in the center of town, where all of this activity went on, near the university. The embassy building had lost two of its floors in an earthquake, the building had basically kind of sunk under the weight. So the consular section was in a Butler building that had been destined, as I understand it, to Mexico to be an embassy garage. Rats would run through the section while you were interviewing visa applicants and grab your lunches. And it was right on the exterior compound wall, so if people were throwing projectiles or burning tires out in the street you were vulnerable.

One day a homemade rocket landed on the street where I lived and actually killed some children in a house down the street from me. We were taken at that point to and from work in embassy vehicles. I don't know if they were armored, but we were driven to and from work. So it was somewhat dangerous, but not as dangerous as things had been in the '80s.

Q: But still, it was Ortega at the time?

GERSON: No, Cristiani was the president. Ortega was in another country. That would be Nicaragua. But it was ARENA – the right wing party which is still in power as we are speaking.

Q: And good relationship with the United States?

GERSON: Yes, but the U.S. had a very bad relationship with its own constituency. This is maybe one of the most interesting things that ever happened to me—how I developed a relationship with a previously hostile constituency, and it was purely by happenstance. When I arrived, I overlapped maybe two days with my predecessor, a big, outgoing, imposing guy. And I was looking around in this mess of a makeshift consular section, and there was a Jesuit priest in there, a young one. This is the year after the Jesuits had been killed at the university. So my predecessor says, "I want you to meet Father Dave. I was so worried when the Jesuits were killed, I went running over to the site because we love Father Dave and we thought that he could be one of them." The priest was an American.

So I met this guy who's more or less my age. He said, "Where are you from?" I said, "California." And he said, "Me, too." Californians always ask, "North or South?" Turns

out he was from San Francisco and I said, "What high school did you go to?" And he said, "St. Ignatius." I said, "Did you know a guy called Maury Wolohan?" Maury happened to be the only person I know who went to St. Ignatius, which is a boy's school. He said, "Yes, he was my 'big brother' at school." I said, "Sheila, his sister, and I are very good friends." We started to talk about California. That was it. He gave me his name, and I gave him my card and he left. He was in there, I think, for an emergency visa for a child with a serious health problem or something.

What I learned when I got there is, one of the few things my predecessor had time to tell me about, was the "Network." The "Network" was an informal group in the United States of liberal, usually Christian, people involved with El Salvador, either because they were living and working there or because they were advocating. But they were definitely against our position on the war and our support of the right wing government. One of my officers with very particular political leanings used to teasingly call them the communist, pinko, leftist, do-gooders, whatever, but most members of the "Network," including the religious workers, were liberal, more left-leaning. I'm not saying that any of these people were supporting the guerillas, but they certainly weren't supporting the government, and they found our unequivocal, as they saw it, support of the government just not working in the direction of peace.

What would happen is, whenever one of these people would get stopped at a roadblock or get arrested or be caught in a guerilla area by the government or be deported, the "Network" in the U.S. would kick in and usually would call every single phone number that the embassy had. It would overload the switchboard and anyone, even the cook at the ambassador's residence, could pick up the phone and get one of these people spewing rhetoric. They had a lot of our home phone numbers. It was just appalling. Everyone, right up to the ambassador, would complain, because whenever one of these little things happened, you couldn't even do business, because the "Network" would make your life miserable. They hated U.S. policy and, in many cases, hated the people that were involved with that policy.

So I'd been told about this and I thought, "Oh, gosh, how am I going to handle that." So, not too long after my arrival and I'm not too clear on the timeline, we actually moved embassies while I was there, so I'm trying to think whether this occurred in the old or the new embassy and I honestly can't remember, but a nun called me. She worked with the bishop of Chalatenango, which was a province in the north that was in the conflictive zone, a hotbed of rebel activities, and the bishop was renowned for, in fact, having a good relationship with the rebels and having tension with the government. So the nun was very hostile on the phone. She basically said, "I'm only calling you, I know you won't do anything for me, I know you couldn't care less but Father Dave told me that I had to call you." So I said, "What's going on?" She said, "My work permit is not being renewed and my residence permit is not being renewed because the mayor of Chalatenango hates me. He thinks I'm educating people to be rebels." She was working in a literacy program. Then she spewed forth a lot of negative rhetoric. "This is horrible and this is egregious and what are you going to do about it? I know you won't do anything about it."

I didn't know anybody yet in the government. I had only recently arrived. She was in San Salvador, the capital, at that time, because I think they weren't letting her back to her province. You had to go through some army roadblocks to get back to Chalatenango and I'm not even sure she could do that. At any rate, I thought, "Where do I start?"

The person in charge of these residency permits was at the ministry of interior. Ministries of interior are never the most liberal government entities. Lo and behold, the person that was in charge of residency permits was a brand new vice minister who was not in fact a politico with strong ties to the governing party, and he was an evangelical Christian who had, I believe, at one point been kidnapped and tortured by government forces. I could be wrong about that, but certainly he had had some history.

I got in touch with him right away. His name was Jorge Martinez Menendez, and he was new and I was new and I said, "Is there anything you can do about this?" He just didn't like this whole thing. He thought it stunk. And he said, "I'll take care of it. Have her come and see me." So I called her back and I sent her to see him and a few days later she arrived at the embassy with a gift and she said, "I would never have believed it, but thank you very much. I never believed I would set foot in this building, but I had to come and thank you."

So I told her, "Well, there's one thing you can do for me. If other people have problems," because these people all knew each other, "Send them to me. But please, don't have the "Network" ramp up, because I can't work on a problem if I can't find a phone line that's available. Stop the "Network" from causing us all these communication problems."

She said that she would do her best. >From then on, not only did I have a great relationship with the vice minister, and eventually the blacklist even disappeared, but we were able to help people, one person at a time. I remember one night, my husband was there for a visit, poor guy, and someone was being held at the airport overnight, a missionary, because his name was on the blacklist. The same nun gave him my number and he called me at home and I had to find the head of immigration at his mistress's house in the middle of the night. The American spent the night at the airport, I spoke to the airport people and said, "Please let him stay there. I'll work this out." And in the morning he was released into the country.

We had a problem where there was a fire fight at a roadblock on the way to the north. At this time, the Mennonites really disliked the embassy; the Mennonite office had been ransacked during a rebel offensive a year before I got there and a lot of their equipment had been taken away by the military and we'd apparently done nothing to get it back, or at least so it was perceived. But they had a young female missionary that they had lost contact with who had been on her way to her village in a remote guerilla area when this fire fight broke out, and they were afraid that she had been maybe killed or injured, or detained by the army, which was more likely, and they wanted to go up there and find her.

I talked to folks in the embassy, and a U.S. military guy in uniform went up there and he

interviewed people and got up to the bishop's office and confirmed she had never reached there, but he was able to confirm that she had been caught in the fire fight and hidden under a house with an army guy, a government guy, but they had been safe when last seen. That still wasn't real reassuring. Nobody could reach the village where she was stationed. And so I got permission for the Mennonites, two of them, to travel up there, at their own risk, but I had to get permission, a special pass, for them to go up there and they got all the way to the village and they found her and she was fine and had no idea that everybody was looking for her. But, again, when they came back they were just so happy with the embassy for taking action on their case.

And one thing after another like this happened, all through this chance meeting with this priest on day two of my assignment. The "Network" just never called anymore, or they just called me once. When Pastors for Peace with their caravans full of equipment, medical equipment, arrived at the border and they wouldn't have the right permits, I'd get one call and just work it out.

I remember just before I left at the end of my tour of duty, I remember that was definitely in the new embassy, a big Pastors for Peace caravan was coming. Peace had already broken out by then and they came to the embassy and we were going to address them as a group and they were going to be gathered outside, because we didn't have enough room for them inside. The political officer, who was not very popular with them, introduced a few people and he got to me and said, "Most of you probably know, if you don't know her, you've heard of her, Leslie Gerson" and they all burst into wild applause. It was a real heady moment!

Yeah, it was a great, fun, time, because, again, you could actually do something to help people, but just through happenstance. If this vice minister hadn't been new there and hadn't had this evangelical background, my requests for help probably would have fallen on deaf ears and I would have become part of the hated establishment.

Q: How interesting! I guess I didn't realize there were that many different kinds of American religious groups down there, Mennonites, even. These were missionary groups?

GERSON: There were two Mennonite groups living there. At one point, after I had been gone for maybe five years, somebody called me from the embassy and said a woman had left off a book that she'd written about her husband's kidnapping and that I was featured in it because I had helped them, so she wanted me to have a copy. So they sent it to me and I read it and I didn't remember the case, there were so many things like that that were going on. Every time your phone rang it was a crisis.

One night I was just saying goodbye to guests after a dinner party and the phone rang and it was a very upset grandparent of an American infant, about two years old, who had been kidnapped and a note had been left: "Don't call the police or we'll kill him." The child's parents were on a business trip to Costa Rica. The grandparents didn't know what to do. They called me and by the morning we had the brand new head of the anti-kidnap squad,

who wasn't readily identifiable by anybody yet and the Spanish-speaking wife of somebody from another agency at the agency posing as friends of the family and going into the infant's house and planting listening devices on the phone and looking around at things and by the next afternoon the child was back. The kidnapper was a family member, who didn't intend to harm the child, but had actually given the child so much ether that he could have actually harmed or killed the child. So, in other words, there were always these very intense things going on.

Q: It sounds like it was very heavily American citizen services.

GERSON: Although you did have an awful lot of visas, but I had very strong deputies who could keep an eye on the visa line while this was going on.

Q: It was a good sized consular section?

GERSON: Quite good sized.

Q: This would have been in the news a lot back in the States and so forth as well.

GERSON: El Salvador itself was always in the news at the time, and then when they sued for peace, Dan Quayle came down for the peace conference. I have my pen, Dan Quayle gave Cross pens to people who helped with the visit. I don't remember if I saw him, but we all got them. I think I did do something, but nothing as significant as our everyday work.

Q: Were you in Geneva when he came through Geneva, as well?

GERSON: No, I don't remember if I was. I don't think so.

Q: Now, how did the atmosphere change as the peace process moved forward?

GERSON: Well, of course, first of all it became safer to go out, although common crime picked up considerately after the war was over. When I first got there, you were told by the RSO, "Don't stop at a red light at night. Just make sure there's nothing coming and just go right through, do not stop anywhere." We had a curfew. All of those things were lifted. Life became a lot easier, people out on the street, people out all the time enjoying themselves. Salvadorans are great partiers anyway. Two or three mornings a week you'd wake up to the music from a mariachi at somebody's house to celebrate their birthday. There were mariachi groups on street corners that you could rent and bring home for your own parties.

And we started working a lot with the rebels as well in reconstruction projects and aid projects. There was a funny story, one night three rebel leaders were meeting with some AID people in the new embassy compound. AID had a separate building. They'd had to turn their passports in, their IDs in, in order to get into the building. But their meeting went on so late that by the time they were done the Marine guard was gone and the

Marine guard had locked the building, so they were stuck in there. And they were laughing, because they said, "For years we've been trying to bomb or attack the U.S. embassy or break in and now we're locked in here."

I used to go to a club with music at night. One of the owners was a rebel politician. I don't know if he'd ever been a fighter, but he was a well-known rebel politician and we'd become friends by then.

One evening I went to an event, some renowned Mexican group was going to sing there and it was a big charity auction or whatever. One of the biggest rebel leaders was there, sitting at one of the tables as a guest of honor.

Q: So they really were reintegrated?

GERSON: They were extremely well reintegrated. The problem was that there weren't enough jobs to go around. The best reintegration, unfortunately, were army recruits and rebel recruits forming armed gangs. Even today gangs are a big problem in El Salvador. But crime really went up steeply. So whereas before the peace you were afraid of bombs or being shot, afterwards you were a little bit more afraid of being robbed.

Q: Do you remember who the ambassador was?

GERSON: Yes, Bill Walker was the ambassador when I first arrived there and then I think Mike Kozak was supposed to replace him but couldn't get confirmed. So Pete Romero just came as the DCM and he ended up being the chargé for his entire tour.

There are still long memories of people who supported one side or the other of the war in El Salvador, or who blamed the incumbent diplomats for the deaths of the Jesuits or the deaths of the Maryknollers. It was sometimes very hard for people who came out of El Salvador to get good jobs afterwards for purely political reasons.

Q: You can be tainted by U.S. policies, whether you personally supported it or not. But that didn't affect you? You weren't high enough level at that point?

GERSON: No, and I never wanted to be an ambassador.

Q: And from what you've said, you were well liked by both sides, I gather.

GERSON: There was a society page in all of the newspapers that came out maybe two times a week. My photo was in there probably more than anyone else's from the embassy. I went out much more frequently than the ambassador. The consul general was simply the person that you had to know. Plus I just met a lot of people very early on, right away, young people that were still in college. I just got an email yesterday from a friend that I met at a dancing club that we used to go to at night, and she is now the wife of a senior Guatemalan diplomat. When I met her she was just a kid in college. We used to go to this club and hang out. The former Salvadoran ambassador in Paris, who was a

businessman, I met him and his wife maybe the first or second week I was in El Salvador because they just wanted to invite the consul to their house, just an artificial meeting, and we became friends.

Q: The importance of the head of the American consular section there is enormous.

GERSON: And it wasn't like in Haiti, where everybody wanted some kind of favor. These were people who usually didn't need you, but it's very nice to know you.

Q: So you weren't facing the same kinds of demands from everybody all the time?

GERSON: No. You would get people who would say, "We'd like to take our maid with us when we're going to Disney World" and at least you'd met the maid, because you'd been to the house 50 times. But that wasn't really why they became your friend.

Q: Why they were getting in touch with you, they weren't bothering you in church anymore and in grocery stores?

GERSON: Right.

Q: You could go out shopping without being accosted?

GERSON: Exactly.

Q: How did things change, as your tour went along, in the second and third years, the "Network" wasn't a problem, partly because you had managed to dismantle it but also because the relationship had changed and presumably there weren't the same kinds of problems anymore.

GERSON: That's right, once people could move freely around the country and the blacklist was gone, the "Network's" interests were being met, as well. Has El Salvador come full circle as a result of its revolution? No. There are still huge coffee *fincas* (plantations) and peasants still don't earn very much, and it's still a very hard life for many. I have a Salvadoran housekeeper and she and her kids come from a smaller town and they're short and squat, Indian heritage. They don't have opportunities that a more Latin person from the capital has. I had a very good friend of mine ask me, when I was trying to get a job for my housekeeper's daughter in their drug store that sells cosmetics and all, the question that was asked me is, "Is she dark skinned?"

So some things really haven't changed all that much. But it's a country where the wealthy people, the "14 families," as they say, never really abandoned it during its roughest period. So it's still vibrant. Because the economic elite never really fled the country with all their money there was a certain ability for the country to jump start itself.

It's very interesting, with huge shopping malls now and all of these industrial parks, but I'm not certain that the wealth has trickled down as well as the revolutionaries would

have hoped.

Q: Were you able to travel around the country a lot?

GERSON: There were areas that you couldn't go into at the beginning, for the first two years, the conflictive zones. So I hadn't been to Morazan, for example, where there's now actually a tourist tunnel that you can visit to see where the leadership of the FMLN (the guerillas) hid out and things like that. But I had been all the way to all the borders and down into the south, Sensuntepeque, Santa Rosa de Lima, La Union, because I had friends who had farms or friends that were down in the San Miguel area. I have the keys to the city of San Miguel, where I ate iguana with the town leadership! It's not a big tourist country, we're not talking Guatemala here. It's a small country, it's not very well developed for tourism. But the people are exceptionally friendly, very easy to be accepted for a foreigner.

Q: Kind of a mountainous country?

GERSON: Very mountainous, 25 volcanoes.

Q: Active?

GERSON: Well, they're not always erupting, but they're not considered dormant.

Q: And beaches on both sides?

GERSON: No, only one coast. Salvador's the only Central American country, apart from Belize that is not on both the Pacific and the Gulf. Very beautiful beaches, very serious riptides. We had a person killed while I was there, a TDYer. But very beautiful beaches and a lot of my friends had houses or family houses along one or more beaches. They always have a swimming pool if you really feel you must swim, because it is very dangerous to go further than the smaller breakers.

Q: And housing was reasonable?

GERSON: Yes. I had a very nice house.

Q: A lot of security around the house?

GERSON: Yes, at that time we all had guards.

Q: Even through the peace period?

GERSON: Correct. They were tapering it off by the time I left, but they kept my guard until I was gone.

Q: This was a three-year assignment this time?

GERSON: That was a three-year assignment.

Q: And that's because all the assignments had been three years?

GERSON: Plus I was in a senior management position, so I think they always tried to keep those people on longer. Most of my junior officers were all 18 months at one point and then two years.

Q: We talked a lot about visas at the previous posts, but I guess you didn't spend much time on that.

GERSON: Well, I did. Visas were our big workload. We had a normal refusal rate and my junior officers and my deputy, they handled it pretty well. Every once in a while I'd be called in, usually for an exceptional case.

I remember one day a woman who had been refused a dozen times, I think one of the FSNs asked if I would interview her. Usually when that happened it was that they thought that somehow the person had gotten a raw deal or that there was something unusual in the case. So I went and talked to her, and the poor woman, I issued the visa and I saw her a few times after that. She had initially followed the guidance that people gave her on the street, and the first time she came in she said she had no one in the States, blah, blah, blah, and it just didn't seem legitimate. Well, in fact, her son was on death row in the United States and he had been accused of and convicted of a murder in a boarding house and it would appear that he'd had either a very poor public defender or maybe been railroaded. She wanted to go see him, she had a lot of money, she had a small business that made lingerie for a bigger company. She was very well off, but of course she'd hidden information about her son's legal problems, thinking that would go against her, when in fact that was her strongest favorable piece of information. After I waded through all the information, she'd kept every news article that had come out about the case, I issued a visa for her to go. And by the time I left the country she had gone several times and she'd been able to have an appeal lodged, but I don't remember how it came out. But sometimes you would get these very interesting and complicated cases.

Q: There seem to be so many of those. Consular officers always seem to have the best stories.

GERSON: And fraud, we didn't detect anybody committing a fraud on the inside. Sometimes we thought that our waiting room guards were probably taking small amounts of money from people to give them a more favorable position in line. But a fraud was perpetrated on us from the outside. I had a lot of problems with diplomatic notes, all had to be vetted by from one particular government official and the groups of travelers would be padded with outside fee-paying travelers. Maybe one person was really going on the trade delegation, but you'd get two others thrown in.

I had a friend to whose beach house I went nearly every Sunday. It was just like an open

invitation, people were always showing up. Someone claiming to be this friend, and sounding just like him, called one day and asked for visas for training for three of his supervisors from his huge factory. I said, "Sure," because I'd had this type of bona fide case before. And I issued the visas and then very soon after one of them got caught at the port of entry. So I re-examined these cases very carefully, looked back at the referrals that came in and the letters that came in, and they were on my friend's letterhead. And I called him, I asked to talk to him at a place where he wouldn't be overheard. It turns out that he hadn't been the one calling at all. So then the big issue was, who in his operation had abused his name and also knew that we were friends. He wanted to find out as much as I did.

Sometimes we only learned of frauds when visa applicants applied to change status from tourist to permanent resident. That could be years later. Usually they were students who were marrying or something like that, they didn't know they were going to meet someone and eventually marry when they applied for their visas. But sometimes they were people who said that they were married and their spouse was not traveling with them to the U.S. when they applied for their visa. But then you'd get a notice from INS that indicated that their spouse had already been living in the States or something contradictory. You'd then send a note back to INS stating that it would appear that a fraud had been perpetrated at the time that the visa was applied for.

But the most interesting were the cases that were stopped at the port of entry, where they were nipped right in the bud, they were never admitted and they often were debriefed and told authorities how they got the visa, how much they paid, who they paid. So you could follow up on those.

Q: They would actually come clean?

GERSON: Sometimes.

Q: And was this kind of a slap on the wrist to a consular officer if that kind of thing happened?

GERSON: Not really. When you're dealing with that volume, you know, you can't read into the hearts and minds of the applicants.

Q: And admitting terrorists was not a big problem at this time, I suppose.

GERSON: Not at all.

Q: What about admitting rebels?

GERSON: Well, if you had their names in your database, but otherwise you wouldn't know who was a rebel either. For example, a rebel politician, somebody that was known, that was not a rank and file fighter, then you'd have to get a waiver if they were to travel up to talk about the peace process. Then you'd get a waiver for them.

Q: And there was a big thing going on in the States at the time about whether El Salvadorans who were here could be sent home or not.

GERSON: There've been programs protecting Salvadorans, either during the war or as a result of natural disaster, from then until now.

Q: And that continues?

GERSON: That's right, because there was a major earthquake. There were those terrific landslides that buried some houses. And Salvador has always been a pretty staunch ally. I think there are people in Iraq from El Salvador. So that doesn't hurt the Salvadoran cause when it comes to extending these temporary programs.

Q: Was that program affecting you at all? I remember there was just a lot of press play about it.

GERSON: No, not really, because once they're in the States it affects the immigration service and not the embassy.

Q: So they were a staunch ally back then as well?

GERSON: That's right, they've remained quite good allies, I think. There are so many Salvadorans in the States, the whole economy depends on the remittances being sent back.

Q: A lot of countries are that way. I guess I haven't asked about high level visits or interesting personalities who came down.

GERSON: We did have quite a lot of attention there. I can't remember names too well, but there were a number of congresspersons who were very interested in the war and the government's performance and would come down. It certainly wasn't a burden on the consular section, usually. But apart from Dan Quayle, who I think came for the peace signing ceremony, I don't remember any presidential visits.

Q: And you weren't running into Richard Burton or the Macys or these blue bloods who you dealt with at every other posts?

GERSON: Not a lot, but there I was dealing with a generally higher level of society in Salvador than I had in other countries of assignment.

Q: Anything else stick in your mind about El Salvador?

GERSON: It was such a small society, everybody knew everybody. If you went out, in the Eastern Caribbean, there's an expression "where the lime is." "Where the lime is" is the hot spot on any given night. And Salvador was the same. So you would often run into

your friends at the same places. If you went to a particular disco everybody would be there, because that's "where the lime was." And if you went out on a real rainy night sometimes you had a hard time finding the lime anywhere. So it was a very small society and everybody pretty much knew everything about you.

Q: Clearly your Spanish improved a lot while you were there.

GERSON: Vastly. When I arrived I told people in the consulate, most of whom had studied in the States, I told the FSNs "I don't care how hard it is, I don't want you to speak one word of English to me." Of course I met lots of people right away and I always spoke only Spanish to them, even though now we speak sometimes more English than Spanish, because they all went to school in the States or whatever. My housekeeper, of course, gardener and guards, dog, well, the dog was from Antigua, actually, but the dog converted pretty easily to Spanish. We all spoke Spanish. And that was it. So when I left I had a really strong 4/4. So that was really good. And people laugh, even today when they hear me speak Spanish. When I was in Geneva, I was very close to the Latin ambassadors and they would always laugh, because apparently I have a very strong Central American accent.

Q: Well, that would be normal, if you learned it El Salvador, I suppose. That's great that you would make that effort. It's very hard to do that when you have a lot of people who speak English better than you speak Spanish.

GERSON: The wife of one of our officers was Colombian and had been a language teacher and I engaged her for a couple of hours a week. I was afraid other people wouldn't correct me if I made a mistake. Her job was just to correct me.

Q: That stood you in good stead. So you have 4/4 Spanish and what, 4/4 French as well?

GERSON: And 4/3+ in French, but therein lies a story of the French Department. In fact I speak and read much better French than I do Spanish.

Q: But you didn't take it from FSI!

GERSON: That's right. The French department gives you tracts from 17th and 18th century philosophers and asks you to discuss them, whereas another language course gives you a timely piece out of a newspaper or an economic article and asks you to discuss it. I did those kinds of intellectual analyses when I was in college and I wasn't crazy about them. I was certainly not interested in doing them as part of my job preparedness.

People often ask me what my favorite tour was overall. I loved all of my tours when I was there, each place, but in retrospect I have to say that for the friends that I made, the interesting political and economic things that were going on at the time, and the actual consular work, the weather, the pastimes that were available, I have to say El Salvador comes in a strong first.

Q: And you were married there as well, you said?

GERSON: That's correct. My husband and I finally got married. We got married in the chapel where Archbishop Romero had been killed. That site was apparently quite coveted for weddings. I originally wanted to just get married at home, because we only wanted about 25 people.

Q: This could have been the social event of the year!

GERSON: The bishop told me that you can't get married at home unless one of you is physically unable to get to a church. He offered me this chapel, which I hadn't even thought about.

Q: And you were successful in having it a small wedding?

GERSON: Yes.

Q: But that must have made the social pages, too?

GERSON: I don't think so. There were no photographers invited. We had Father Mucci, an American priest, a Franciscan, who's been in El Salvador for maybe forty years now, as the celebrant. He runs the most incredible operation, starting with just inviting old people who lived in the street to his home for dinner on Christmas and Thanksgiving to starting an old peoples home, to starting a school, to starting factories, to starting housing for the poor, to starting a restaurant where people could learn the catering trade, to starting a hotel, the most incredible guy.

Q: It's amazing what some people can do.

Any other thoughts on El Salvador?

GERSON: Not that I can think of. And you may notice that no one was arrested for fraud while I was there out of the consular section. Maybe we just blew it!

Q: After you left, maybe?

GERSON: Not that I'm aware of.

Q: You didn't think of extending a fourth year?

GERSON: I did, but I've always felt that there's something about the rhythm that worked for me. I was promoted there, very unexpectedly, I had just opened my window and I was promoted to the Senior Foreign Service, so I would have been working under grade. I also was offered a place in the Senior Seminar, the only consular officer in my year's Senior Seminar. So it seemed like it was time to move on.

Q: That would be a good reason. So the next assignment was the Senior Seminar?

Today is October 30, 2008. You're just entering the Senior Seminar. That's quite an honor, I guess.

GERSON: Well, of course it's a great program. It was a great program. It no longer exists.

Q: It no longer exists?

GERSON: No, the Senior Seminar was abolished three or four years ago. I believe it was felt, now I wasn't around when this decision was being made, but our good friend John Lange was, that it was touching far too few people at great expense. Now parts of it have been incorporated into some leadership training that's required for everybody. But of course the experience of bonding with 30 people from many different agencies for a whole academic year has been lost. For those of us who have been involved in it, its loss was very, very sad. There's still an alumni association. In fact they have an event coming up shortly. Those who have been through the seminar really bond quite well in most classes.

Our class was particularly excellent and amongst the administrative staff had a reputation long after as one of the most cohesive groups, especially since I think we were preceded and followed by groups that were less cohesive and less happy campers. But we had a great year and I was in fact elected, in my absence, since I had to go to a doctor's appointment, vice president of our Senior Seminar. Never be gone when there's an election being held and you don't even know your name is in contention.

Ken Hunter, one of the Department's senior Civil Service people for years, was the class president, but of course the class had people from all of the armed services, FBI, CIA, AID. It was really a great class.

Q: Now, what was the system on that? Did you just get a mysterious telephone call? Was it something you applied for?

GERSON: I didn't apply for it. I think I got some sort of notification that I was eligible, because normally you were recruited for the Senior Seminar on your first potential reassignment after promotion to the Senior Foreign Service, although there were some exceptions.

There were some very long in the tooth folks in our class as well. Not too many, but it was felt, too, that sometimes people were placed in it because there was nowhere else to put them. I can't say that for certain.

But the idea was that your name came into contention as soon as you were promoted into the senior service. I think my CDO asked me would I be interested if I was chosen and I

said, “Well, sure.”

Q: Because you had heard lots of good things about the program?

GERSON: Right, I had heard many good things about it, known people who’d been in it, who’d spoken highly of it and then it came down that “Well, you’re going.” It was only when I arrived there that I learned that there were only five women out of the 30 participants and that I was the only consular officer in the class. In subsequent classes I’ve noticed that there have been several consular people per class.

Q: Was that kind of typical for the times? Would five women have been proportional?

GERSON: I never really looked at the previous classes that carefully, but I think there were fewer women because there were just fewer women in the senior service. But subsequently it seems to me that when I’ve looked at the classes, the several classes that came after, there was a better mix. Of course from the other agencies, State didn’t pick those participants and from the other agencies, except AID, whose representative was a woman, there were no women either.

Q: I guess that would be fairly typical from the military, especially.

GERSON: For the military, but also for the intelligence agencies.

Q: How many people were State, out of the 30?

GERSON: 15, half. Two were Civil Service, State Civil Service, but people I had actually known and worked with before.

Q: I didn’t realize that it was only about half State.

GERSON: As I understand it, and I was not involved in the seminar’s administration, part of the ability to finance it came by having people from outside. The Air National Guard, for example, transported us and they had a participant. I believe the other agencies paid and that helped defray the cost.

Q: And it was right at FSI?

GERSON: It was at the new campus of FSI. It was great. Of course we traveled a lot. We traveled all over the United States. Not foreign, but all over the United States. We did go to the Mexican border. And we designed our own program.

Q: Each individual?

GERSON: No, the class as a whole at the beginning looked at several themes and decided which themes we were going to focus on in our travel. We all traveled to Alaska, we looked at oil. But within our travel, for example the south trip, we would decide if we

were going to look at education, were we going to look at high tech. So we had themes and we actually organized, apart from the Alaska trip, which comes very early on and so there's not much time to organize, we actually organized our trips: where would we go, what activities we might want to see, the types of scientific places, the types of communities. So it was a challenge to actually organize your program right away.

Q: Especially since you were vice president?

GERSON: Well, everybody divided up and everybody had a responsibility. So it was really quite good. I remember we had an introductory segment and I think we chose the Soviet Union, the former Soviet Union and the new Russia.

Q: Which would have just falling apart at this time? What are we talking about, '91, '92?

GERSON: No, this was '93-'94. So it had fallen apart. But we were looking at the economy and transition issues.

Q: It fell apart before that, yeah.

GERSON: But it was still very much in transition. I remember when we were talking about what kind of speakers we would want to have on this, of course there were lots of different topics, but somebody had the idea, well, let's have McDonalds as one speaker, because, as you may recall, there was a big hoopla when McDonalds went into Russia. So I was in charge of getting that presenter, being a McDonalds fanatic all my life as a consumer. I did some calling around, because I had had some dealings with McDonalds' management over an actual trade and labor dispute in El Salvador. I discovered that it was McDonalds Canada that went into Russia but I was able to get them to come down from Canada to address our group. They had a wonderful film describing all the difficulties with getting started, how tanks actually ended up bringing some of their building materials to the site because nothing was getting delivered. It was fascinating how they were finally able to make a decent French fry out of a potato that was grown in the former Soviet Union and was only about one inch long, tasty but too small and how McDonalds revolutionized potato production in Russia. A lot of the farms began to grow potatoes and other food products specifically for McDonalds. The McDonalds session was quite successful.

Q: My time in Moscow, it was still a huge thing there. Now they're on almost every corner, like they have here.

GERSON: When I went to Moscow on my most recent assignment as an inspector, our hotel was right around the corner from this first McDonalds that had been described to us in the Senior Seminar. So my husband said, "Let's go there!" The first night we went there for dinner and it kind of brought back the whole Senior Seminar experience.

Q: It's still there, in fact they were just having an expansion of it about the time we left.

And do you remember what the other themes were?

GERSON: Well, education was one. Certainly we looked a lot at high tech, which was very hard for those of us without a high tech background. Many of the folks were really into high tech but for people like me it was eyes glazing over sometimes. I wish I could have done the year a second time, because with the bit of background that I gained in technology it would have made a lot more sense when we went to Sandia Labs and were talking about artificial intelligence. We looked a lot at grass roots activism in the rural South and we went into the Mississippi Delta area.

And we had one month when we did our own project and that was supposed to result in a paper or some kind of a written product. My project involved migrant laborers in the Florida area. I had a friend who was working in that area, in fact one of my former students from when I taught high school was working in that area. I went down and visited fruit farms, fern farms, looked at some of the conditions of labor, some of the migrants' problems, even simple problems with getting W-2s, getting paid, the workers' living conditions. So, we each had an individual project that we also studied and presented.

Q: So you got to know America a little better?

GERSON: A lot better, considering that I seem to have spent a lot more time outside the country than inside.

Q: I think that happens to all of us, get to know other countries better than our own. Do you remember the other trips, Alaska, the South…

GERSON: We did the Southwest. All the groups do three days on a farm in the rural Midwest. Mine was luckily corn, because others were pigs and they smelled really bad when they got back on the bus. Went up to the Northeast, stock exchange and Boston, went down to Charleston where we consulted on education.

Q: Now were you traveling in a group of 30?

GERSON: Yes, we were.

Q: This was quite an expedition when you all showed up?

GERSON: A component of each trip, or most of the trips, involved one of the branches of the military. So we did a live fire exercise at Camp Pendleton. We were also codded out to an aircraft carrier. That's when you fly out on a plane and get caught by the arresting hook as you land. I couldn't find my way around the carrier, so for any event people had to come and get me because it was impossible for me to get my bearings where there was no indication of which direction I was pointed. There were no portholes or anything in our rooms.

Q: You actually stayed overnight?

GERSON: Stayed overnight, went up and watched the stars.

It gave me a different appreciation of the military, really. I had kind of a negative military bias from my days in university. And also from some of my assignments, where I just didn't interact very much with the military, or where they seemed a little cowboyish, as had been the case with some in El Salvador during the war. But all of a sudden I was meeting really interesting, well educated people, extremely attuned to civilian issues, and it gave me a really good appreciation.

Q: Presumably it was a real plum for them as well, to get this kind of assignment?

GERSON: Yes, this was considered one of their top schools.

Q: Did you also have, I remember a lot of people who've come out of the war colleges talk about how it changed their life, in terms of getting physically fit and things like that.

GERSON: Well, we did have a segment on getting physically fit. I've never been exactly overweight, but many who had, including some of the military, who had high cholesterol, high blood pressure, they really took this very seriously, this wakeup call that we had in our very early-on health session. For me, it was never a really big thing. In fact, I gained weight during the Senior Seminar. You're going around the country. When you're doing that you're eating in restaurants all the time and you're staying up talking to your colleagues, and people were always snacking late at night. So I found I actually bulked up a bit. It's okay, I was pretty emaciated when I started. But certainly some were very into physical fitness as a part of the Senior Seminar.

Q: How much of the time would you have been traveling?

GERSON: We took at least six trips in 10 months. Not all of them were super long. We tried to keep it down, keep it focused.

Q: And you have to organize all of them yourselves?

GERSON: Each person was assigned a different trip to work on.

Q: And you were organizing the speakers who came to FSI as well?

GERSON: That's right. So you were always organizing. It wasn't just handed to you on a silver platter, apart from the Alaska trip, which had been organized already.

Q: So a good experience?

GERSON: Yep, very good and of course as soon as we started the seminar we were already bidding on our next assignment, because the Senior Seminar is only one year.

Q: It was then not linked to a specific assignment?

GERSON: No, it was not and it was a little tense for some, because you're going to be gone a lot during the year, so a lot of your networking opportunities are going to be gone. And it was that year, too, as I recall, that CDOs got a little bit tough on senior officers and assignments. Many of them had been used to just lobbying, not even bidding, apparently. I was unaware of this but it was so informal, you knew somebody and they were giving you a job in x bureau. It wasn't even formal bidding. But they were starting to get a little tough on requiring everybody to submit a bid list so that there was an even playing field. We were divided into little home rooms and I remember one of my colleagues saying to me, "I haven't even gotten any calls to come for interviews." So everybody, the State people, were a little worried about their onward assignments.

Q: Were you looking to go back to Latin America again?

GERSON: I was looking for something that was different. I had what I thought was one of the greatest consul general jobs in the world in El Salvador, at an excellent time, as I already described. How could anything be better than that? To be a consul general but in a place that wasn't at war didn't have all those challenges.

So I started looking for bigger management jobs. I had, I believe, some consul general jobs on my bid list, but I also was looking for DCM jobs, in my complete naïveté.

Q: Why naïveté?

GERSON: Well, because I was a brand new Senior Foreign Service officer, I had just gotten promoted, so a lot of those jobs were more senior and one of the jobs that I put on my bid list was DCM in Geneva. I went and talked to the Geneva desk officer at IO (the Bureau of International Organizations), Joel Spiro, and I told him, "I've put my name on the list, so when you get the bid list I want you to at least know who I am and why I've bid on the job." And he took one look at me and he said to me, "Look, you're a brand new OC. It's an MC job. You're a consular officer. You've never worked in IO."

Q: Which would make you a perfect candidate!

GERSON: Joel said, "You seem okay, but you have essentially a snowball's chance in Hell for this job." I understood that IO probably had its own candidate. A bureau like IO doesn't have an opportunity to place people who've been its loyal employees in many jobs around the world, so you would certainly want to keep Geneva in the IO family if possible. So I just stepped back and started looking for what else was out there.

But shortly thereafter, Dan Spiegel, who was a political appointee ambassador, arrived not knowing really well how the process of selecting a DCM went, and he told the bureau that he would like to interview all the people who had bid, at least those who were in Washington and any of the others he could speak to by phone.

Q: He was already in Geneva at the time or had not yet gone out?

GERSON: That's right. He was still preparing to go to Geneva. Clark Rogers was chargé at the time in Geneva, just finishing up. So I was called for interview, along with other people, I presume. Dan hadn't seen my PAR (Personnel Audit Report), and he didn't know anything about me. So he just said, "Tell me about yourself. Why would I want you as my DCM?" So we chatted for a while. You know how you can tell when you've hit it off with somebody? By the time I got back to the Senior Seminar rooms, DAS Melinda Kimble's secretary was calling and asking if they could talk to me, because the Ambassador had apparently come out of this interview and said, "I'm very interested in her being on my short list" or something like that. So they thought maybe they better take me seriously.

Certainly by IO's Christmas party I had the job. I remember I went to IO's Christmas party and I found Joel Spiro and I joked, "Remember me, Joel? You told me I didn't have a snowball's chance in Hell to get this job." And he said, "You got it, didn't you?"

So I don't know who else in IO had hoped to have the assignment but it worked out quite well for me. I will always be very grateful for Dan Spiegel's not knowing that he should have somebody with x or y experience, because it gave me the chance to move into something more complex. I learned when I got there that I was a fish out of water, and it was a steep learning curve, but I still think it was a good move for me.

Q: It was complex, but it was not completely unmanageable. I had actually worked in IO before I went to Geneva and I still found it to be, found myself to be a complete fish out of water when I got there.

GERSON: At that same time that I was in the Senior Seminar and this bidding was going apace, someone that had been in the Senior Seminar the class before I had, who had also, unbeknownst to me, bid on the Geneva job, filed, I don't know whether it was a grievance, it wasn't a class action lawsuit at that point and it was sort of for reverse discrimination. In fact, it turned out that this individual had not gotten the job that he had wanted out of the previous Senior Seminar and had apparently lost seven or eight jobs to women candidates and felt very aggrieved. The worst, in his opinion was the Geneva job. A lot of male colleagues started calling me and saying, "Leslie, have you seen this document that's going around?" apparently to gather some support. I said, "No, what are we talking about?" So I went over to the main State Department building and I actually looked at this grievance document, somebody had a copy, and it detailed a few of the jobs the individual had lost to women. Then it culminated with, "But the most egregious of all was DCM Geneva" and then it talked about how completely unqualified a candidate I was. By the time this actually reached any kind of hearing I was already finishing my three years as DCM in Geneva, without ruining our relationship with a hundred other countries in the world and having accomplished some fairly meaningful U.S. goals.

But at the time I felt really awful and I remember I called up Dan Spiegel. We went out to

lunch. When he went to post he hadn't chosen a DCM. I think he was down to three people. When he went out to post he asked two or three people there for their recommendations. I think he read them the short list of names and I happened to know two or three people at post: the security officer, the management officer, who all said, "This is somebody you can work with." So that kind of tipped it in my favor.

Anyway, when Ambassador Spiegel came back to DC for a consultation and while I was still in the Senior Seminar, I confronted him. I said, "Look, So-and-so is complaining that you really wanted to pick him but you were told you had to pick a woman. I would rather not go if those are the circumstances, because I want to go where I'm wanted." He was rather shocked and he said, "That's absolutely not true. That person wasn't even on my short list." I then felt that in all good conscience I could go to post.

Q: So he would have there been a few months, only, before you? Because this all happened when the administrations changed, so it must have been in '93?

GERSON: I got there in '94, summer of '94. I stayed on six months after he left, so he would have been there about six, seven months.

Q: So you headed out to Geneva. You had your French already, so you didn't have to worry about that.

GERSON: That's correct. It turned out I used more Spanish in the long run. I headed out to Geneva. I'll never forget the first couple of days of work, meeting my Russian colleague who I recall actually died at his desk soon thereafter. He had a brain tumor, he was an older fellow. He had spent 30 years doing multilateral work, rotating among Moscow, Geneva, New York. And here I was…I wasn't even certain of all the acronyms of all of the organizations that we were dealing with.

The great thing about Geneva was that all of the diplomats, at least from the big countries, were specialists in multilateral affairs, they accepted you. I found it was very non-hierarchical. They were just collegial. So it was easy to get the help that you needed.

Q: Partly, I think, because people had different portfolios which were not the same. So you might have a DCM or a third secretary who was in charge with issue x and you knew that was the person to go to.

GERSON: And you were working with them, even if it was the ambassador. Of course it was a great place to live, as well. For the first time ever I had a chef fulltime. That was kind of hard to get used to. I ate out a lot because work continues into the evening with this representational cycle, you can't just say, "I've been invited to three cocktail parties tonight, but I think I'll go home and watch the football game," because the evening events were really work. Because of the pace of UN meetings, when the meetings were going on, the only time often that you had to follow up on anything that was developing was if you went to a cocktail party and buttonholed somebody there, so that you could discuss an issue.

I remember once I took my husband, I think it was the Human Rights Commission, I took him into the meeting hall on a visitor's pass and he sat down and at first he couldn't tell where the person was speaking from. Then I said, "They're back there. They're from an NGO. We'll never see who they are." Then he said, "Nobody's listening. They're all running around talking to one another." I said, "That's how the work is getting done. That's the lobbying." He found it the most amazing thing, this complete disorder.

"Let's go out to the coffee room." Some important person is speaking, but it's more important for you to hammer out a vote, running back and forth. So it was really a completely different world.

Q: Ambassador Spiegel obviously wanted you to be his deputy and his alter ego *but did he give you a set of things and say, "These are yours?" Did he want you to manage the shop while he did the political things?*

GERSON: Well, kind of. There were things he wasn't interested in doing, so I did them.

First of all, there was Geneva Group. I think it took me about three years to figure out what Geneva Group really was! Of course it fell to the DCM to manage this working group.

Q: And the Geneva Group was?

GERSON: A group of, I think there were about 15 to 20 of us, all developed countries. Our focus was to keep the budgets of the specialized agencies transparent and under control.

Q: And was it still what we used to call ZPG at that time, zero real growth?

GERSON: I will speak about this later, because one of the biggest things was trying to keep the WHO's (World Health Organization) budget to zero growth. I think that was the Geneva Group's philosophy, but the U.S. government was even stricter. They didn't really want any exceptions, because you may recall we were in a very awkward time when we had not paid our dues for some while and yet we were insisting on keeping costs down when we hadn't even paid up. So we were in a difficult negotiating position even amongst our colleagues and friends, who were paying their dues.

Q: And this was true under multiple administrations, as I recall.

GERSON: We had accumulated at least two, three years of arrearages in some areas.

Q: Was this to all the agencies?

GERSON: I think almost every agency. There might have been a couple where we were in a little bit better condition, but I think it was pretty much across the board we were

behind. There might be individual programs that we were caught up with because we'd given money for certain things, like peacekeeping, for example, which wasn't our issue in Geneva, anyway. But in general we were pretty much the delinquent ones everywhere.

Q: Maybe I should ask you at the outset as well, what was the UN in Geneva?

GERSON: Of course everybody thinks of the UN as being in New York. The UN is composed of, in addition to the General Assembly and the Security Council, there are a number of specialized agencies associated with the UN, most of which, not all of which, but most of which operate out of Geneva. Mostly they're the social and economic agencies. So there's the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). There are the human rights programs. There's the International Telecommunications Union. There's the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). There's the World Health Organization and several others, including small ones, like the International Postal Union, which actually operates out of Bern, which do important work. For example, the International Postal Union does all the regulation on all of the courier services and international mail and everything. They actually provide services and agreements that make things work.

Q: As DCM, you were actually accredited to all of these?

GERSON: To all of these, right. When I arrived the ambassador was really interested in the World Health Organization, many of the very big ones, UNHCR, human rights. But some of the smaller ones, he was more than happy to hand over, the International Postal Union, for example. I did a lot of work with the World Intellectual Property Organization, World Meteorological Organization, some of these other smaller ones. He just couldn't be everywhere and there were always meetings going on, always.

Whenever there were big international meetings there was always high-level representation from the various capitals. The U.S. always had a position and we were supposed to lobby and get our concerns included, so people had to be present at the important meetings and certainly present at the evening events, to make sure that we were seen and advocating our positions.

In addition, because almost every country in the world is represented in Geneva, there were over 150 national days. Now, the Fourth of July is a big thing. July 14th is a big thing for the French. But all of a sudden, everybody's national day, even Malta's, becomes important, because that could be a vote that you need later. So you can just knock yourself out going to national days.

I remember when I first got there Central American national day, because it's all five countries on the same day, came up and the ambassador had the invitation, I didn't have one yet. He said, "Why don't you go to this?" I said, "I think you should go to this, too. I'll go with you." And so I went with him and because I had already met most of the Central American ambassadors and because I was a Spanish speaker they were pretty much bowled over. It was pretty much the first time that a U.S. ambassador had ever

gone to one of their national days and as you can attest we had remarkable success with the Latins in the Human Rights Commission and other fora because we had for once a really good relationship with their representatives.

That's why I say I spoke as much Spanish as anything else. I used to have dinners with only Latin Americans in my house, ambassadors and DCM's, with Salvadoran food. These ambassadors were often overlooked at the big dinners at the ambassadorial level, not only ours but other ambassadors, because they are from small countries and you can only seat 20 people at your dining room table. Which 20 countries are you going to invite, the UK, or Guatemala?

Well, it turns out that everybody's vote is vital when it comes down to an election or a Human Rights Commission vote.

Q: Absolutely. Now I suppose you were having delegations in from the United States for many of these meetings?

GERSON: All the time. We had actually a little office within the mission that was just for conference support, with two secretaries and special offices reserved where you would have those people working. And of course you had to work with them, to make sure that there was actually an officer assigned to that, to make sure they got everything they needed, that they got their schedules set up so they could navigate through the Geneva bureaucracy, if they weren't frequent visitors.

Of course the Human Rights Commission was the biggest delegation, it seemed, every year. Sometimes I even had some of the U.S. delegation staying with me. In fact, certainly year round there were people in Geneva for one UN meeting or another.

Q: But how did you relate as DCM to these groups which came in? They presumably thought they were going to run the show and here you and the ambassador were the permanent representatives and the people on the spot. Did that normally work out happily?

GERSON: It did. I don't remember too many people completely trying to run the show. Somebody like Geraldine Ferraro, obviously a very important person, internationally recognizable, who'd been coming to Geneva for a couple of years, I never remember her or others like her coming and asserting that they were in charge of everything. We were always included in things. It was important to attend the meetings that they would have, or many of them, make sure that there was embassy representation, so you could stop something that might be not particularly tactful or maybe mix the wrong people together in a meeting. But I don't recall there being a big problem. It seemed to me they were quite grateful to be supported and housed and included in the mission.

Our biggest problem for a while was our disarmament folks. There were three missions, actually, in Geneva.

Q: Let me stick with the delegations for a few minutes. A lot of these, I would expect, would be delegations on very technical kinds of issues. If they're talking about intellectual property agreements or something they would bring out the experts from Washington. In those kind of cases, would you and the other members of the mission have come in to do the political work or say the Geneva Group work or that kind of thing that they might not be tuned into quite so much?

GERSON: Certainly, and I recall advising or working with them. Obviously we're not going to know the technical details. But as I recall we would help look at guest lists for things, talk about how it might be appropriate to approach a specific group or a specific mission to get their cooperation, make introductions.

I remember, for example, Ken Bernard, our health attaché, he was always present when people came in to work on medical issues, on the technical side but also on the diplomatic side, and he would let us know if there was something going awry or something that we needed to be aware of.

Q: With the political ones, it was very often things like are we going to let the PLO into a meeting or I guess former Yugoslavia.

GERSON: Do I remember debates over that! Yeah, on the technical ones, I don't recall getting overly involved. I honestly can't remember really focusing on the technical issues, but I don't recall having really big problems with that, either.

Q: But now you must have learned an awful lot, you said you were doing a lot of WIPO and ITU and that kind of thing.

GERSON: That's right, not that I know a great deal about patents or anything like that, but you have to learn enough in order to deliver demarches, to lobby people. So I learned quite a lot. Not that I could ever market myself as an expert in any of those areas, but, yes, there's an awful lot to be learned, so I found it very intellectually stimulating.

Q: And you'd run into the same diplomatic colleagues in the morning at a WIPO meeting and in the afternoon at a UNHCR meeting and that kind of thing?

GERSON: Absolutely. You were always dealing with the same people on different issues.

Q: Did you feel like you were doing any good? The UN gets such a bad rap in the United States

GERSON: Sometimes I would laugh, because you would come into a meeting, a negotiation, and somebody who'd been doing this for many years longer would say, "We've been talking about that for 10 years." And you'd think, "Oh, my gosh, to me it's brand new, but if they've honestly been talking about this for 10 years, what are we achieving?"

One area where I think I did, or we, as a mission, did some good was on indigenous issues. This is something I knew precious little about before getting to Geneva, and I had to wade through the issues and in fact my name will go down in the annals of indigenous lore for a speech that I had to give, or an intervention, at one of the indigenous meetings. That actually occurred when I was deputy assistant secretary, but I learned about indigenous issues by attending some of these indigenous fora in Geneva and meeting some of the activists who had been arguing for years over issues like "people" versus "peoples" and group versus individual rights. So I became aware of some of these issues and some of these terms of art that became important to me later on, and I can talk about those when we get to that.

What I really learned a lot about is politics within the international community, within the multilateral community. Ambassador Spiegel left post about six to seven months before my assignment was to end. I had been very much in the background on a lot of issues, because he was a very assertive person and he was the ambassador. I ran the inside of the embassy and my issues, but I didn't try to exert myself in his stead. He was the one who spoke to Washington every day. He was the one who had the ideas. He'd come back with an idea: "I want Time Warner to do this" and I'd have to make it happen, with the rest of the team.

But I never saw myself as challenging him, so much so that when he was getting ready to leave, the Department, as I understand it, was thinking that they should send a chargé out, because who was this Leslie Gerson? And Ambassador Spiegel, bless his heart, said, "Oh, no. Leslie can do this." In the remaining six months or so after his departure, I think he departed around Christmas and I departed in late June or July, I was the chargé.

Luckily he was well respected and I remember people saying to me when I was going to the ambassadorial lunches and other events, "He never lorded it over us and he always consulted us." And I know this for a fact. If there was going to be a vote or an issue coming up, he'd call even a small embassy and ask them, "What do you think about this position?" And people really liked that and I inherited that good will and could easily continue it.

But the World Intellectual Property Organization election was coming up during this time that I was in charge, and there were a dozen candidates for the leadership, at least. Group B is Europe plus the Western countries, the U.S., Japan, New Zealand, Australia, and Group B had <u>five</u> candidates for the organization's director position. Now, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that any group that's that badly split is not going to be able to win the leadership contest. But we got instructions from Washington that we were going to win this at all costs, preferably x candidate if not y candidate if not z candidate, but definitely a candidate from Group B.

And one of my demarches was to meet with the head of the African group, who was the South African ambassador, a former political prisoner, colleague of Mandela, and tell him that the Sudanese candidate, who happened to be the deputy director of the World

Intellectual Property Organization already and a long-serving UN civil servant, not a Sudanese diplomat, that we would really love to have him stay on as deputy, but not only were we not going to support him as the candidate, which is understandable, we had our own candidate, but that we would like for him to withdraw from contention. Well, that was a political killer. All you have to do is count how many countries there are in Africa, more than 40 votes right there, add the rest of the Moslem world, and on your side you've got five candidates in a fractured Group B.

That is not only a no-win situation, but it's going to break any possibility that you have of winning allies for something in another organization that you need. It's just going to alienate a whole group of people.

After consulting with my staff, notably Kristie Kinney, who was our economic counselor and now our ambassador to Manila, we talked about that demarche and decided how we were going to craft it to say what we needed to say but not ruin all the rest of our diplomatic agenda, because we had some other important issues coming up. I just learned how this politics works. It was very interesting.

Q: So did the Sudanese win the election?

GERSON: Absolutely. There was no question. During the preliminaries and first rounds, where everybody was casting their votes for their country's candidate, there somehow had been some suggestion that someone from Group B, someone from France, had made a statement that had been endorsed by the rest of Group B that we would never support an African for this position.

Luckily, there was a women's ambassadorial group, of which I was a member. There were 13 woman ambassadors, if I recall properly. The group had been started by the Dutch ambassador and was a very cohesive group and I was very fortunate, since I was only a chargé, to be included, but it was felt how could you leave the U.S. out? A couple of the women ambassadors from Africa came running to get me right away and said, "Was this true?" I said, "I can't say what two people might have said to each other, but it was never said in a Group B meeting, because I have been in every Group B meeting, every one. The big thrust has been how can somebody from Group B get elected, not keeping anybody else from being elected." So I went, at their behest and spoke to the South African ambassador, who was livid and remained upset for quite some while. I assured him that his was not a Group B position. That statement might have been made, but it wasn't made where I ever heard it.

I was very interested in this election. I just flew by the seat of my pants during the lobbying and voting, but of course the Sudanese candidate won. At that time, almost simultaneously, Kofi Annan was named as the new UN Secretary General and he'd come to Geneva and there was a big reception in his honor. It was the day after the WIPO election, in the evening. I never asked my husband, who as you know is Haitian, I never asked him to come to anything official. That was just not his thing. But I went home and I said, "Honey, you're putting on a suit and you are coming to this reception. You might

not enjoy it, but your purpose is to come with me and you are going to meet every single African ambassador that we have there, because I want to make it perfectly clear that the U.S. representative, in particular, had no bias in this election."

Because that was the implication that was coming out of this, that Group B had a racial bias. And my husband met everyone dutifully, he found that a challenge. I'd say, "That's enough. You've talked to him enough. We're going to go to meet the ambassador from here or there." And I don't know whether it helped at all, but I was determined that somehow the U.S. was not going to be tarred inappropriately or incorrectly with this rumor. If we opposed the African candidate for any reason, it was going to be said that the reason was because we supported our own candidate.

Q: You had some of the UN organizations which were trying to do good in the world as well, the World Health Organization was one that you mentioned. Did you have the impression that those really are worthwhile groups doing good things?

GERSON: Maybe I'm naive but I actually think they are, especially in targeted programs. The big thing is, they're massive bureaucracies and there's all this parity on leadership. "We need a Latin American in this job and we need an African in that job and we need an Asian in this job." I never heard anybody say … and they're the best candidate. It was just, there were too many Asians in leadership and so we need a South American in this one. That always bothered me.

But I think in general the organizations are useful and do very good work. But when you get 150 countries or more and all want to have their priorities met, negotiations can be tricky. I remember with the World Health Organization, when we were looking at budget and other issues, they wanted to start focusing on the aged, because there are a lot of countries with an aging population. Well, there are a lot of countries where people never live to be aged. It seemed to me that that was a little more important. But everybody wants their little priority, because the staffs are made up of these vast numbers of employees from all of these different countries and everybody works by consensus. So I'll scratch your back on infantile polio or whatever if you scratch my back on aging yoghurt eaters in the Caucasus. It's just impossible to make a fixed budget extend to all of those things. So I was bothered by the inability to set priorities and this need to have every country, including the U.S., insist on its priority, instead of agreeing that we can only fund 10 priorities this year and ours just doesn't reach that level yet. It was just impossible for any country, including our own, to put its proposal on a waiting list.

Q: Must have been about the time the AIDS crisis was starting to take off and it must have been during ...

GERSON: Yes, UN AIDS was just created then and Peter Piot was selected as its first coordinator.

Q: Was the U.S. involved in helping to create that?

GERSON: Very heavily, yes, and if fact a member of our diplomatic service became deputy to Peter Piot in the brand new UN AIDS establishment. We worked very hard on that.

Q: Weren't you having trouble with the head of the WHO as well?

GERSON: Oh, yes. Now you get me into my two stories about the WHO. Dr. Nakajima, a Japanese citizen, had been head of WHO for quite some time and he was married to a former U.S. diplomat, as I recall. He was no longer very effective.

The U.S. just decided, and I think we were pretty much the leaders in this, that Dr. Nakajima had been in charge of WHO long enough. The U.S. didn't want to be in charge of WHO necessarily, but it needed a change in leadership. I'm not sure of all the reasons why, but it was just stagnating and having trouble setting priorities and it just needed new leadership. We thought the same about the World Meteorological Organization, but we were not able to effect change there at that time.

There was quite a delicate balancing act in order to have Dr. Nakajima agree not to run again. Of course it involved getting Japan to agree. I was not involved in all of the initial work, but when Ambassador Spiegel left I became the sole U.S. liaison with the Japanese on the Dr. Nakajima issue. The State Department didn't want a lot of hands in this.

Q: It still hadn't happened by that time?

GERSON: Well, I think it was just about the time Ambassador Spiegel was leaving that the issue was coming to a head, because it was in May, if I'm correct when Dr. Nakajima was about to step down finally. Dr. Nakajima was still on board, just before I left. The final World Health Assembly was taking place and the elections were due to take place. So there was quite a transition, but we needed Dr. Nakajima to announce that he was not going to stand, so that new candidates could be found. I remember a couple of lunches where we were putting the finishing touches on this, to get the Japanese to agree that enough was enough. I honestly don't remember a great many details about it, but it did occur.

What I remember most clearly is that in the final World Health Organization meeting the U.S. was the head of Group B—the leadership rotates--and the U.S. position was that there would be zero growth in the new WHO budget, zero period growth, no fake growth. The World Health Organization budget had always been adopted by consensus, but we were instructed to go in and vote "no" if we didn't get zero growth. Yet the WHO was one of the organizations that even some of our colleagues in the Geneva Group felt that there was a good reason to have modest growth, because the work was so important and lifesaving. So when we went into the final World Health Organization meeting there were only two other governments supporting our zero growth position: Russia and Iran. This was not a good position to be in.

However, Dr. Nakajima wanted to go out with a consensus vote on the budget. He did not

want a "no" vote from anyone and the Japanese wanted to send him out with a consensus, as a face-saving device, if I recall properly. I can't tell you how many hours I spent talking to the Japanese. I had my French "sister" and "brother-in-law" in town for the weekend. We tried to sightsee, but my cell phone was just going off constantly, with the Japanese wanting to negotiate over this or that point. Then I'd have to consult with Melinda Kimble back in Washington, who I don't think ever slept. And effectively over a weekend, a two- or three-day period, we made a lot of concessions. But when we went into our Group B meeting, I want to say it was on a Monday, before the final assembly which started at 10:00 and our group meeting was at 9:00, there was still no agreement.

I was sitting on the podium as head of Group B, Ken Bernard was on one side, and a couple of other people on the other, and we had no agreement. I said, "No problem. You guys go in and vote however you want. We're voting "no". We're not afraid to go in and vote "no" as the only "no" vote. We've done it on other issues. So we'll just vote "no". The budget will pass easily, but there will be at least one opposing vote--from the U.S."

So after the Group B preliminary strategy meeting broke up and they were all going in to the assembly, the Japanese first secretary, political counselor, if I recall, came up, he was very short and I was already standing on the dais so I was towering over him, and he said, "Can't we just go and have a coffee? I think you and I could work something out." And I stood up, I never lose my temper, never, and I said, "Look, I have negotiated and given way on points that were important to you for the last couple of days. Negotiation means we both give something. You have given nothing, nothing. So there's nothing more to be discussed. We're going in and voting "no". That's all."

There were still a few people in the room, notably my French colleague and a couple of others who now were looking at me with their mouths open in shock! The Japanese first secretary left. As I walked out, my French colleague came up to me and said, "That's exactly how you have to negotiate with the Japanese." Group B intended to go any way that the Japanese wanted on the budget issue. If the Japanese agreed to go with zero growth, all the others would switch to our point. But nobody wanted to be the first one to switch.

Unbeknownst to me, I think Ken Bernard rushed back and made a call to Donna Shalala, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, and said that I had negotiated brilliantly. And basically, after our little encounter, my Japanese colleague went back and told his ambassador there was no more wiggle room. So they caved and all of a sudden we had consensus for zero growth.

Dr. Nakajima was happy. He just wanted his consensus at that point. So we won this incredible victory in a very unusual way.

And I felt so bad because I lost my temper. And then a lot of my colleagues came up to me and said that's exactly what I had to do at that point. I felt bad. I was pretty forceful.

Q; You mentioned Donna Shalala. I presume she would come out from time to time for

these meetings, as would other cabinet officials?

GERSON: Absolutely. Secretary Christopher came regularly for talks on the situation in the former Yugoslavia. He always came on three-day weekends. The big joke with his protective detail used to be that the security people weren't concerned about any attacks on him other than by disgruntled mission people who'd had their three-day weekend plans cancelled yet again. The first year I was in Geneva there were pre-Dayton talks, always on weekends. Then of course Ambassador Holbrooke started coming to push a solution. That was when we would have the presidents of Bosnia, Croatia, and Serbia come in to our conference area, and the chocolate chip cookies baked by my chef were very important features of the peace process. Even Serbian President Milosevic apparently relished those chocolate chip cookies.

And of course, where everybody was going to sit during those talks and how we were going to organize the folks became significant issues. In fact, Richard Holbrooke has in his memoirs a description of a round table that could seat x number of people that we procured in 24 hours at his request. Well, you can't just run out and get such a large table. I think we found one in France and had it brought back to Geneva and luckily he liked it.

I remember once the talks were to be held on a Swiss holiday and I had said to Holbrooke's assistant, "Look, if you want anything special you've got to tell me before the holiday, because on the holiday, everything will be shut tight. There will be no ability to get any special effects." Lo and behold, on that holiday the Holbrooke party called from their plane en route to Geneva and said they wanted flags of several nations, including the EU, displayed in the conference room. Luckily, we were pretty tight with our diplomatic colleagues and hustled to make this happen. The Russians were seen running up the hill from their embassy carrying their flag, because we had never displayed their flag before. We whisked out an EU flag from the UN without authorization and ran up the street with it and returned it later. I'm not sure anyone noticed we took it! There were always these theatrics that went on in order to make these meetings happen just the way the Holbrooke party wanted.

But we always had a lot of activity in Geneva, a lot of activity.

Q: Now, Yugoslavia would have been a lot of UNHCR work, as well, I suppose.

GERSON: Absolutely. UNHCR (the UN High Commission for Refugees) was a very big player and the ICRC (the International Committee of the Red Cross) because we had the Rwanda genocide and then the outflow of Hutus to Zaire during that time. We had the Bosnia conflict. It was just, the poor fellow, Luis Arreaga, who had that portfolio, he used to write these mammoth cables. I don't know how he ever went home. There were always complex issues: how are we going to manage this, what was our response going to be, budget meetings.

Q: It was one of those posts, I suppose, where you would read the morning paper and find that you were working on most of the headline stories?

GERSON: That's right. It was literally all happening in Geneva, it seemed like.

Q: Did you have presidential visits, as well?

GERSON: Not while I was there. President Clinton had come a couple of months before I arrived. There was still buzz about his visit. I remember I used to go sometimes and eat in the restaurant where Clinton had dined. They had put the plaque on the front that said, "Clinton ate here" and I heard stories about that night. But it was bad enough planning dinners for cabinet secretaries who couldn't decide what restaurant they wanted to go to and having Diplomatic Security check out maybe eight restaurants and then the Secretary would end up eating in his hotel room. I decided right then and there that if I were ever Secretary of State I would only eat in drive through McDonalds!

Sometimes high-level visitors would decide to travel at the very last minute and the Intercontinental Hotel would be filled. They were great there. They'd sometimes throw people off whole floors to try to set us up with all these extra rooms, control rooms. It was sometimes quite stressful managing logistics.

Q: Did you run into problems with our ambassador to Switzerland thinking he or she should have a bigger role when the Secretary of State came, for example?

GERSON: Not really. The ambassador to Switzerland most of the time I was there was in quite poor health. He did come down occasionally for things, but I don't recall him insisting on his presence at anything.

We did have a crossover issue with the embassy and that was Nazi gold. At the time that I was in Geneva the issue of Nazi gold in Swiss banks was escalating. That was being managed out of Bern, because it was not originally a multilateral issue, except it began to become one. So the ambassador or I would go up to Bern and get briefed and we talked a lot with the number two in their political section, who was managing that issue, Dan Smith, who later became the PDAS in the Bureau of Consular Affairs and is now the Exec Sec of the State Department. He was just the number two in the Bern political section, but he was the real expert on the issue. We did do a little bit of that with Bern.

And I do remember the bilateral ambassador coming down a couple of times for events, but he was definitely not omnipresent.

Q: Okay, generally lucky, then. I remember a couple of instances earlier where it got to be …

GERSON: Perhaps that was a previous ambassador.

Q: Pre-Dan Spiegel and pre-whoever was, it would have still been a Republican administration and with Morris Abram there was always the question of who would shake the Secretary's hand and greet him when he got off the plane.

GERSON: The ambassador in Bern definitely did not come every time the Secretary was in Geneva for these pre-Dayton meetings. It would have been every three-day weekend.

The interesting thing was, in fact, the previous ambassador, Morris Abram, was living in Geneva even after Ambassador Spiegel replaced him.

Q: Now that was kind of a strange situation that must have caused some awkwardness from time to time.

GERSON: I think at first it did. Ambassador Abram was married, of course, to a senior UN civil servant, so he chose to remain in Geneva after his tenure. I think it was very awkward for Ambassador Spiegel at first, because if he went somewhere for dinner, thinking that he was the representative of the U.S., often former Ambassador Abram would also be there, simply because he'd formed relationships with the host. As time went on and some of the diplomatic faces changed, that situation diminished a little bit, I think. But I think it was a little awkward at first. You never knew which U.S. ambassador you were going to be seeing, or both. You like to assert yourself when you're in charge. That's hard when your predecessor is standing right next to you.

Q: Sure, which also brings up the issue that you tried to raise a couple of times and I put off, about other American ambassadors in Geneva.

GERSON: Well, it wasn't a really big problem, but we did have a couple of empty floors in our building, no longer empty by the way, because our trade representatives moved in post-9/11. But those floors were largely reserved for these very large arms control delegations, which would be episodic. They'd be empty most of the year and then these large numbers of arms control people would come. And they did their own work without much reference to the mission, and there was an ambassador in charge of arms control. But when these groups would come in, they often worked late into the night and would have communications needs and so forth that were far in excess of what we required on a normal work day.

So they would eat up a lot of mission overtime or they would get upset if a communicator wasn't in, for example, to open up the channels. Communication wasn't as automated as it is now, where you can transmit telegrams without anybody being there. So there'd often be a little bit of tussle over why the communications systems couldn't be open 24 hours a day.

Sometimes we would have little disagreements, not because of the work the arms control people were doing but simply the fact that they needed us for extraordinary support. They didn't have their own infrastructure, and we had other demands for support that we needed to respond to as well.

Q: Weren't some of them there year round?

GERSON: Three or four arms control people were in Geneva year round.

Q: But not the ambassadors?

GERSON: The ambassador was. But other ambassadors would come in, like Steve Steiner. Yes, the arms control ambassador was there pretty much year round, but they were not a big problem during the time when they didn't have their delegations in.

Q: And USTR (the U.S. Trade Representative) as well had a fulltime ambassador?

GERSON: They did and they were in another building, right across from the World Trade Organization building, in a building that was quite insecure, which concerned our security officer, because our RSO was also their RSO. The Israelis were in that building, and it was kind of a flimsy apartment building. Well located, but USTR came in to the main chancery building after 9/11.

Q: And as DCM a lot of that management would have fallen onto your shoulders, when there are those kinds of issues, even though they would have had their own DCMs as well?

GERSON: They did.

Q: Now you haven't talked about the management/administrative side of the job. How did you find that?

GERSON: I found that quite interesting. If I hadn't been a consular officer I probably would have been a management officer. There were two different philosophies with the two different management officers who served at the mission while I was there.

The first one, Ron Rabens, was extremely hands-on. Luckily, I learned a lot from him about how to manage high-level visits, in particular. He was just a master at that, because there's an art, how you set up your initial relationship by phone with the Secretary's office (S) and then how to work with the advance team and your countdown meetings and so forth.

Ron was only there for about a year, and then when he left another person followed him whose philosophy was quite different. He delegated almost everything to his more junior people. Now the more junior people often did a lot of the regular work anyway on the ground, but I think when you're working with S and you're doing your countdown meetings and you're getting a call from somebody very senior in the State Department, you certainly want to have a senior person, not an FS-03, on the end of the line, even if the FS-03 is very capable and is going to do a lot of the work.

It was just not my way of running things and so I literally stepped into that gap a lot in the last two years, being the primary liaison with S and taking more interest in the countdown meetings and things like that, because the management officer saw his role

differently and didn't intend to alter that.

Q: But it was a big mission, wasn't it?

GERSON: A couple hundred people, with all the FSNs and all. That's just our mission, not the other two. We had an excellent staff. We had enough people to run these things. But there has to be somebody who knows everything that's going on.

Q: And that was your job?

GERSON: And that was my job.

Q: Between that and all of the substantive work with a dozen different organizations must have kept you awfully busy.

GERSON: I had very good staff telling me what I had to focus on. For example, the political section and the econ section, they basically told me what I needed to focus on, so that I didn't spin my wheels trying to read everything.

We had a process that I've grown to appreciate since I've been inspecting other posts. I never saw every outgoing cable. We had a rule: if the cable mentions the ambassador, makes a policy recommendation, or discusses something requiring high-level attention then it had to come through the front office. But if not, it just went out under the section chief's authority. So, in other words, a reporting cable on a meeting, it just went out, and I read the comeback copy the next day to keep informed.

There are a lot of posts where communications bottleneck at two or three different points: first the political counselor, then the DCM, then the ambassador, before a telegram goes out, so the Department complains that a reporting cable on something takes three weeks after the event to get on the wires.

I had excellent section chiefs the whole time in Geneva and so I don't think we ever sent something out that when you saw the comeback copy there was a violation of those three rules or the cable shouldn't have gone out. I can't recall one time.

Q: And how did this relate to delegations? Did they send their own cables, or did those also have to go through the mission?

GERSON: The guidance, for example, for the Human Rights Commission, when they needed to request guidance overnight, I would come in at 6:00 a.m. and read overnight reports so that I knew what they sent out. You simply had to get your reports and requests for guidance overnight. And I think most delegations were the same. They needed their guidance in real time. Sometimes there were night meeting sessions that finished at 9:00, 10:00, 11:00 at night. I can't be there, nor can the ambassador, controlling everything. So the requests for instructions simply have to go out with or without mission leadership reading and clearing. Plus, I couldn't be there working every night because every time

there was a large meeting with delegations from capitals, there were loads of representational events associated with the meeting. Much of the backroom lobbying went on during receptions and dinners. You could not afford to be absent.

Q: Of course! How was the relationship with the Swiss employees?

GERSON: Well, most of them weren't Swiss. They may have been living in Switzerland, but it was a really multiethnic mission.

Q: Which is suitable for a mission to the United Nations.

GERSON: Exactly. So we had people from all over the world working for us. Some Swiss, some French, some from all over: the Philippines, Pakistan and so forth. In general I think the relationship was quite good.

Ambassador Spiegel was not really big on including the "local employees" in events at his home. His entertainment was very focused on substantive issues. His dinners would be very intense business dinners. As a result, the political, maybe econ counselors, maybe refugee counselor, depending on the issue, were often at the dinners. So the FSNs and most of the other officers or technical staff rarely went to the ambassador's residence except for the Fourth of July, or maybe a Christmas party, which was often a pot luck, no host, bring your own contribution.

Switzerland was very expensive and if you wanted to just entertain mission staff, that had to come out of your own pocket. And since the official dinners were very business oriented, why would you invite the communicator or why would you invite the GSO FSN?

So there were other things to involve employees. There were newcomers' teas that were usually at my house, and I started something called Friday night at the DCM's house, and I would have one person from another agency and one person from the Marines and one FSN and one person that was a secretary, maybe six people who never worked together or hardly knew each other and their spouses. That got to be popular. The problem is it got to be very costly, and I never was able to get to all the employees. But for some people coming to the DCM's house was a big thing, because they were kind of disgruntled that they had never been invited to events at the ambassador's home.

Q: Yeah, if the ambassador was taking that approach to entertaining, that puts an even greater load on the DCM to sort of create the team spirit.

GERSON: His dinners and his entertaining were very frequent, very focused and very successful, but by necessity one had to leave out a whole lot of people and that detracted a bit from team building.

Q: So then could you say that in Geneva, unlike some little hardship post, people saw to their own entertainment much more and it matters much less?

GERSON: That's true to a certain extent. But staff still likes to be included in some way in the visible and important work. They like and deserve to be known and recognized by post leadership as often as possible. There was never any official entertainment on a weekend in Geneva. Everybody in the whole international community savored their private weekends.

Q: Yeah, the UN believed strongly in weekends.

GERSON: So do Europeans in general, but still there are people who like to at least come from time to time to your house.

Q: They like to be asked. If they want to come is another issue, right?
And how did you enjoy life in Geneva, or did you have any time for life?

GERSON: I did, actually, because of this weekend philosophy. Once Secretary Christopher stopped coming every three-day weekend, it was great, because you could get out of town, even just nearby in Switzerland. There are a lot of things to do. The Swiss are not the most naturally open people. But I made a lot of friends there in the international community. I had some Swiss friends already. Having a dog was a great way to meet the neighbors, because when you walk everybody talks to you when you have a dog and they have a dog. So it was a great place. It didn't bother me that there were no large clubs and that the night life didn't last 'til 3:00 in the morning. That's not my style anyway.

I did go skiing. It was wonderful when you could wake up in your bed, look in the mirrored closet opposite you, which reflected out the window, and see if Mont Blanc was visible and the sun was out. Then you could decide whether you were going to open your eyes, put your skis in your car and head up to the Alps or the Jura across the way. I wasn't one of those really avid skiers and avid mountain climbers, but I did go to the mountains regularly.

Q: And a good jump off point to see Europe, as well, I guess.

GERSON: I had spent time in Europe before. A lot of people visit you when you live in Switzerland.

Q: Must have been a long commute for your husband.

GERSON: Yes, but he did it, every six or so weeks.

Q: And were you running back to Haiti, as well?

GERSON: No, I never travel to Haiti. I haven't traveled to Haiti for years, because of the political and the security situation.

Q: Well, a good experience. Did this get you geared up to want to stay in IO?

GERSON: Well, the interesting thing is, when I went to El Salvador I had already been diagnosed with a cancer. When I went to El Salvador my oncologist was very loathe to let me go, because he told me that I probably only had one year of normal health, which didn't turn out to be true. So I went to Geneva and in Geneva my health began to deteriorate, not in ways that really affected work that much, but it became obvious through blood work that I needed infusions of immunoglobulins. So I used to take two cell phones and my work and go up to this clinic in the mountains once every month or maybe every two months and get these seven-hour long infusions of immunoglobulins. And my oncologist decided that when I came back from Geneva I would need to have a bone marrow transplant.

So my bidding was somewhat difficult, I removed my name from consideration for the job as consul general in Paris, which had always been my dream job, and I had took a job with the Board of Examiners.

Q: You decided to bid just on Washington assignments?

GERSON: Right, and ones that gave me flexibility. I knew that if I had a bone marrow transplant I would be out of commission for months. So I bid on Board of Examiners while I was preparing for the bone marrow transplant because I would be able to do that job during the four, five, six months of chemo and then I could leave and have my bone marrow transplant, and the Board of Examiners could live without me for several months and then I could come back to the office.

Q: Had you done that before?

GERSON: No.

So I bid on Board of Examiners (BEX) and was accepted under those conditions and then I went home to see my oncologist, who said, "Gosh, you're doing mighty well. I don't think we'll do this now." And I said, "If I were you, I'd get bodyguards." And I explained to him that I had given up consul general Paris. He said, "Can't you tell them you can now go?" I said, "That's not how it works!"

I was happy that I didn't have to stop work right then. I had checked out Johns Hopkins as a potential transplant center. I was not pleased with their responses to some of my questions. My insurance wasn't going to pay for me to have a transplant at Johns Hopkins as an outpatient, only in in-patient status. I was happy not to have to deal with that issue right then.

But there I was, going to be at the Board of Examiners, which is an important job, but I had just sort of stopped my career right then and there. And when word got out that I was not going to have my transplant then, Melinda Kimble, who had been the deputy assistant secretary in IO when I was in Geneva but who had moved on to be the acting assistant

secretary in OES (Bureau of Oceans, International Environmental and Scientific Affairs), called me and asked would I come to OES and I said, "Look, this is not really my expertise. What do you want me to do?"

And she said, "Well, I'd like you to come and become the office director of this particular office that does both science and technology and policy and planning issues and look at its future. Is it correctly organized and tell me what you think?"

Q: As a regular assignment, or as a short-term thing?

GERSON: Well, I only stayed there eight months, but I can't remember whether I was filling a gap in its leadership or why I could leave after eight months.

Q: You were going over as an office director, rather than as an inspector of some kind?

GERSON: That's correct.

Q: Now if I can stop you there and be rude and interrupt, did you do anything with BEX?

GERSON: Yes, I was there a few months. I even went out to Chicago and did some examining there. I enjoyed it. But they understood that it was only temporary and that I was going to leave for medical reasons anyway. It was not the end of the world for them for me to move to OES. My assignment was broken, if I recall properly, and I was assigned to OES.

Q: Can I ask you a little bit about the BEX, while we're on it, how you found that? How did they do examinations at that point.

GERSON: Well, at that point, because it's changed subsequently …

Q: And tell me what year we're talking about, as well.

GERSON: We're talking about, this would have been the end of '97. We had two teams of examiners each day, maximum number of six people on each team, so maximum number of 12 people were being examined each day, with two teams of four examiners looking at each group. If you didn't have six candidates, then you could have four or five, but six was the most you could handle. And you had a combination of exercises that the applicants rotated through, that included one on twos, where you gave the examinees some scenarios to work through, where they did a test demarche...

Q: Two examiners and one student?

GERSON: Two examiners, always two examiners. We also gave the candidates some practical exercises, "you are a vice consul if this were to happen, okay, well now, if this goes wrong, what would you do?" Kind of a mixture of those, as well as a writing exercise and then a group activity where they were members of a country team in a

fictitious country and they each had to compete for a limited amount of funding and decide how to set priorities but advocate for their program, learn to compromise, how to negotiate and so forth. Each person was scored on a number of competencies independently by different inspectors who were looking at them, even in the team activity or the group activity. For example, I knew that I was looking at candidates one and three and somebody else was focusing on candidates two and four. It's not that you didn't listen to everything that was going on but you had your targets. Then you scored at the end and you announced to people right away whether they passed or failed.

Q: So this was carefully scripted, every group that came in would have exactly the same test as the previous day's?

GERSON: No, you had some varieties of questions. There was a book of scenarios and questions and you knew which ones you would use that day. We always felt that the people from Georgetown were debriefed by their professors or mentors as soon as the test was over before they could forget anything. You often knew that some of the people from certain universities came in and knew, at least in general, what to expect, where sometimes you'd get people who'd come in from out of town who had no idea what they were coming up against. That inequity in preparation opportunities always bothered me a little bit.

And we also traveled to two or three other cities in the U.S. as well. I went to Chicago and tested for two, three, four weeks, depending on the number of candidates in that region.

Q: And these were all people who had passed the written exam?

GERSON: Correct.

Q: Were there also people who were coming in through special procedures?

GERSON: Correct. We examined specialists as well, in a slightly different format. BEX was just starting the program where family members who had worked as PITs (Part-time, intermittent, temporary) overseas could apply to take the oral exam, but I didn't examine any of those, that I'm aware of.

Q: Without taking the written?

GERSON: Right.

Q: And they had some internal programs, too, didn't they, the Mustang program, for example?

GERSON: Mustang, I never saw that. But certainly we had people who were Pickering Fellows and others where the Department had recruited candidates and paid for a portion of their education.

Q: They had also started the Pickering at that time as well, okay. And they would just be treated just the same as everybody else?

GERSON: We didn't know who they were until after the exam.

Q: So, a very different philosophy than they've just changed to now. You would just have people you had absolutely no background on, they would come in to a day's evaluation and you'd make the decision?

GERSON: It used to be even worse, where you didn't know anything about them. When I was examining you did have some questions where you could evaluate, for example, how they might have solved an ethical dilemma in the past. One of their questions might be, "Describe a situation where you had to make an ethical choice?" So, in other words, they did get to tell you a little bit about their past, because naturally in order to answer the question they had to tell you something about themselves.

It had been, at one point, that you knew nothing about them at all and I saw a slight evolution while I was at BEX because I came back to them later after my transplant.

Q: And was there any special effort to get diversity?

GERSON: Yes, but you didn't pass somebody because they were diverse. Other programs recruited diversity candidates to come in in greater numbers to take the exam. The scoring was quite consistent. Examiners were aware of diversity, however.

Q: But it would be more likely that they would get into the oral, at which they would be judged equally than that you were looking extra specially for minorities or something?

GERSON: That's right. Nobody said, "We need more Hispanics, so I think we'll give this person the nod."

Q: And was language taken into account at all at that point?

GERSON: Only after a candidate had passed. If they passed, then they could sign up for the telephone language test that might give them an extra point or so on their score and they would place higher on the hiring register. Now all of that is changing.

Q: Changed quite fundamentally. I wouldn't be surprised if it changes back again at some point.

GERSON: Who knows? It's changed a lot over time.

Q: Did you enjoy doing that?

GERSON: I did, very much.

Q: And still in touch with some of the people you examined?

GERSON: One for sure. There are people that I probably examined that might remember me if they saw me, but one candidate in particular passed by a hair's breadth and my colleagues basically gave the pass to me because I was so keen on the guy, who wanted to be a consular officer. I have run across him on a number of occasions. I've inspected a place where he was serving as well.

Q: And you made the right choice?

GERSON: I don't know. I think it's open. He's got his detractors. He's a very different person. I don't want to discuss that, because he's still got his career ahead of him.

Q: Of course. Was it a different test if you were going into a different specialty?

GERSON: No, no. What happened when I was there too, there weren't enough people on the register, because they were opening up hiring and they needed all of these officers, the DRI (Diplomatic Readiness Initiative), so it was our job to call people who had already failed the exam by one point or two points. And that was very interesting. I got my list of 10 people or whatever and I called them and of course some of them were already in other, very good, employment.

But a couple of them were so excited and one of those guys I have kept in touch with, actually. I had to call him in Korea and tell him that we changed our mind. And he was as happy as a clam. That was really kind of fun.

Q: That's the nice kind of call to make, yeah. Unless you have people mad at you because they've changed their life when this is really what they wanted to do.

So you did that for six or eight months and then you moved over to…

GERSON: Not even that long. I think it might have been four or five months. It wasn't very long and then I moved over to OES.

Q: What was the name of the office there?

GERSON: Science and Technology, but it did have this policy planning component. And the person who was my deputy, who was Civil Service, was brilliant, absolutely brilliant and a creative policy thinker. My first question was why he wasn't in charge of this office, and I felt a little awkward. But Melinda, I think, wanted to evaluate his potential for leadership as well, because, again, he had his fans and his non-fans.

And during that time, in addition to looking at the office structure, I ran an office that had to do its day to day business. The Science and Technology office involved keeping science and technology agreements going with a number of countries worldwide. So I

actually ended up heading science and technology meetings in Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing that included the White House science advisor and other participants from highly technical areas. All very interesting.

And our office budget was so minimal that, of course, I always flew myself economy. And you flew all that way for a two-day meeting, at which you had to stay awake because you were essentially the moderator for the U.S. side and then come back two days later. It was incredible.

Q: That's a killer. And you didn't have much of a science background, if I recall.

GERSON: No, but you didn't really have to. The technical people that you brought from, let's say, the Department of Commerce or the U.S. Geological Survey, those were the people that talked about the actual details. My role was really more to keep the agreement alive and help determine which projects were still moving ahead and do we really still want to do that or can we enhance this agreement. So it was a little bit more of the Geneva type work, but on a bilateral basis.

Q: And these were agreements on what, for example?

GERSON: Well, these were cooperation agreements between two countries. So these were umbrella agreements that would allow agencies, because the State Department had to coordinate the umbrella agreement, that would allow, for example, two other agencies, like the Army Corps of Engineers and their equivalent, to work on something, if you know what I mean. So we would bring together those entities that had actual projects ongoing, an aeronautics project or an environmental project, and they would be at the table.

Q: And suddenly doing East Asia for the first time, which must have been interesting, too.

GERSON: Right. I flew to Asia three times in three months, for two days each time.

Q: Were there a lot of Civil Service people in the office?

GERSON: Almost all. Very few Foreign Service people across the board in OES, which was always a problem, but Foreign Service staffing was in deficit, anyway, and it was impossible to fill all the jobs with officers.

Q: So that was on the science and technology side. On the policy planning side?

GERSON: Policy planning involved deciding the direction that OES should go. Where should we put our emphasis? Writing speeches for the non-existent Assistant Secretary. And then G (the Undersecretary for Global Affairs) was just established, so we had our relationship with G and how were we going to play into that?

In the long run, I recommended the division of the office into two. Science and

technology was so particular, let those guys do their thing and let policy planning spin off and work directly for the Assistant Secretary, or the PDAS or whatever, and deal with policy for the whole bureau. Why should oceans have a policy planning person when you've got this policy planning unit? And I recommended that my deputy become the head of that unit.

Q: Of the policy part?

GERSON: Correct. Now I've heard that something else has happened to it, and my then-deputy moved on to another entity. But he truly deserved to be in charge of policy planning.

Q: Did you have any major policy planning exercises while you were there?

GERSON: I honestly can't remember.

Q: This ended up being just eight months? But a good introduction to a different part of the Department?

GERSON: That's right, and it was right next door to my eventual office. Then what happened is, of course, I was bidding again, wasn't I, because I still didn't need my bone marrow transplant. So I thought, "Well, what do I do now?" So I looked at EUR jobs, because I knew I didn't have a medical clearance that was going to permit me to go to a hardship post. I was looking at principal officer Montreal and a few EUR office director jobs and a couple of WHA office director jobs, but what I really wanted was principal officer Montreal, which belonged to EUR in those days. Now it belongs to WHA.

So I called up Tony Wayne, who was the PDAS in EUR and I said, "Tony, look, this is what I'm interested in. Tell me if you've got a candidate for it, because I'm a big girl and if you have a candidate already, then I'll redirect my bidding. Because I'm sure there are a lot of people who want Montreal."

He said, "No, no, we're very interested in you. You're right up there."

So gradually, as time went on, I let other potential assignments go, because I thought I was EUR's candidate for Montreal. When I tried to follow up on my candidacy, the response always was, "No, no, stay where you are. We got you."

Well, it turns out, of course, Montreal went to somebody who was an ambassador coming out of another EUR post, a smaller EUR post, and I think EUR knew all along that she would get the job. I was very upset, not because I didn't get the job but because I had let other good jobs fall by the wayside. So EUR offered me three office directorships and I said, "Well, of the three that you're offering, Switzerland-Austria-Germany is that one that, despite the fact that I worked in Geneva, I'm not a German speaker, I can't read any of the newspapers, I don't have any knowledge of these countries. The other two that you've offered are much more suitable because I have some knowledge of the issues, the

languages, and the cultures." Of course, they offered me the Switzerland-Austria-Germany job, the one I felt least well suited for.

So I accepted the job, and I went on Christmas vacation to El Salvador. While I was in El Salvador I got a long distance phone call from John Shattuck, who was the Assistant Secretary for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL), offering me a DAS job. Well, I knew John because he had often been in Geneva, which is, I'm sure, why he offered me the position.

Q: For human rights meetings, yes.

GERSON: You don't bid on DAS jobs. So I would never have thought, had never lobbied, I had never spoken to anyone about it at all. And I said, "I'll be very happy to take that." And I was very happy to call up Tony Wayne and tell him that I was going to take the DRL job. He tried to tell me that being an office director in EUR was better. And I said, "I don't think so." So I parted ways with EUR and went over to DRL.

And then John Shattuck left DRL. That was the second time that this happened to me – that the boss who hired me left shortly after I took the job. Gare Smith was the PDAS in DRL at the time and I had known Gare also from Geneva. I hadn't been on the job two weeks when John Shattuck announced that he was leaving to be ambassador to the Czech Republic and a new Assistant Secretary was coming in. I thought, "I might not want to work for that new Assistant Secretary. Who is Harold Koh? Why would I want to work for Harold Koh?" Turned out to be an absolutely incredible experience and within a month or so Gare also moved on and I became the PDAS to this Harold Koh, who I later learned was also asking, "Who is Leslie Gerson and why can't I bring my own PDAS with me?"

Q: Today is November 6, 2007. I'm continuing my interview with Leslie Gerson.

GERSON: Although I was familiar with human rights from Geneva as a theory, this was a completely different thing, being the DAS and then very soon thereafter the PDAS in a bureau on the Seventh Floor.

Q: And just for the uninitiated here, a DAS is a deputy assistant secretary of state and a PDAS is a principal deputy. And when you were hired, it was originally as the DAS responsible for what?

GERSON: It was a very unusual office. The structure has changed considerably over the years. There was a senior advisor for assistance who was a political appointee. It was a DAS level job, but it couldn't be a DAS, because there weren't enough DAS positions allotted to the bureau. And then there was a DAS that oversaw the area officers. And then there was another DAS that oversaw the multilateral issues. And that was the job that I was hired for.

DRL was grossly understaffed and had very few Foreign Service officers. Over the years,

jobs in the G bureaus, jobs that were not in regional bureaus, always appeared to people to be less career enhancing. This was true in the promotion scheme of things, because functional bureau jobs were different and when a promotion board looked at your portfolio and saw that you did something that they didn't understand intuitively, you just didn't seem to get the breaks on promotions. So over the years the bureau had become more and more staffed by Civil Service.

Then there was the huge subdivision of DRL that assembled the annual human rights reports. Although that office was in another building, it was part of my responsibility as well. Then there was the new, congressionally mandated, religious freedom office. At the same time I arrived, its new head, former director of World Vision, came on board. They seemed to see themselves as a separate and equal structure, rather than under the authority of DRL's Assistant Secretary.

And there was also the office the dealt with labor issues. They had a relationship with other agencies and they also were in the process, while I was there, of getting a high level director, who also saw him or herself as having a direct relationship to the Secretary.

This was a time when Congress, I don't know if it's still true, was really engaged, not in how the office ran, but on specific issues, wanting to give money and positions to certain issues that were of importance to individual or groups of members of Congress. This affected the whole DRL structure and how funding was earmarked for subsets of DRL and therefore hived off from the bureau as a whole. Women's issues had already been taken out of DRL, for example, and given to a coordinator for women's issues, whereas you would have thought that women's rights would also be under the human rights umbrella.

Q: That was our big slogan at Beijing, women's rights.

GERSON: As a result of Beijing, as I understand it, Hillary Clinton, because she went to Beijing, identified someone to take the lead on women's issues. Somehow out of Beijing grew this Office of Women's Issues and that budget and those issues were stripped out of DRL and yet DRL also, certainly in the Geneva context and other multilateral fora, needed to speak to women's issues as well. So there were these parallel relationships with offices that often saw themselves as separate and not reporting to the Assistant Secretary but having some personal relationship with the Secretary's office. This situation made our job complicated.

So it was a very interesting time, and coordination was paramount. As I understand it, because I was literally only there a few days with John Shattuck, DRL under John Shattuck had an important role, but he did not have a strong personal relationship with the Secretary, Madeleine Albright. It was not automatic for the Secretary to say, "Let me consult DRL" or "Let me have the Assistant Secretary for DRL come with me on this trip." When Harold Koh came, somehow he struck up a strong relationship with Secretary Albright very quickly.

Q: Had he been her choice, do you know?

GERSON: I don't know how he got the job. I know that he was quite amazed in many ways that he was selected, because of course he had had an adversarial relationship with the U.S. government over the status of the Haitian detainees in Guantanamo. So I think he was surprised but pleased that the administration would actually somehow accept him. But I honestly don't know how he was identified.

Q: A Yale law professor, he may have had a Clinton connection, as well, of course.

GERSON: You see a picture over there? Harold and I at a state dinner, greeting Clinton. I only went because Harold took me. But Clinton clearly knew him immediately in the receiving line; the President did not have to be reminded by the prompters who Harold was. As soon as he saw Harold, he greeted him, they talked about some things and then moved on. But I think a lot of that relationship developed when he was Assistant Secretary. Harold is younger than I am and younger than Clinton, so they couldn't have had a relationship from Yale days at all.

But at any rate, for whatever reason, he developed a very good relationship with Madeleine Albright and that, plus a number of particular issues, raised the profile of our office. We were no longer begging to be involved in things. In fact, we were asked to undertake important tasks, sometimes very much on the spur of the moment. And Harold also had a very excellent relationship with Congress. One time I had to spend a number of hours trying to figure out how to spend all the money that some in Congress had earmarked for DRL, which of course annoyed the Department no end because the earmark was not more money for the Department, of which x million would go to DRL. It was take x million out of State's existing budget and give it to DRL.

We didn't ask for that. We didn't lobby for it. We didn't do anything to get it. Some suspected that we had somehow made an end run around the budget process to get that earmark and we hadn't, to the best of my knowledge we hadn't, and I was certainly placed where I think I would have known that. But how to convince State's leadership that we didn't ask for this earmark and how to spend the money in a way that the Department realized that we were trying to help and not hurt others. At any rate, our profile certainly went up thanks to Harold Koh's stature.

Harold was an incredible person to work with, so brilliant and so nice. He was a great baseball fan and he had a photo in his office of Willie Mays making his famous over the shoulder catch, along with other baseball memorabilia. He was a great Boston Red Sox fan and a couple of years later when I was leaving church one Sunday, I was listening to NPR on the radio on the way home in the car and there was a broadcast interview with Harold Koh. They were talking about things that you hope for almost despite all odds, and the upshot of the interview was that there were two things that Harold always hoped for in his life, that he didn't want to die before those happened. One was the reunification of the two Koreas, on which his father had labored long and hard, and the second was that the Boston Red Sox would win the World Series. Of course, when they did, he

actually paraded the trophy around the Yale campus.

But at any rate, I remember one day he said, "Let's all leave work early," about 4:00 p.m. A whole bunch of us, maybe 20 or more people, went to Orioles Park. We didn't have the Washington team yet and we went to Baltimore for the baseball game. And we're sitting there and he's bought everybody beers and hot dogs and we're waiting for the game and he's looking around and he says, "You think we'll see anybody else from the Department here?" I said, "Do you think that most Assistant Secretaries take their offices to the ball game? In many offices, the regular staff can't even get an appointment to see the Assistant Secretary. They could go a whole week and never see the Assistant Secretary."

But he was just so approachable and anybody who had an issue, everybody, he reached out to everybody, no matter what their level. He wanted to talk to them about what they were doing, meet with them. It was an amazing place to work.

But managing him as the PDAS was very interesting, because he came from academia, where he had a great deal of autonomy and all of a sudden the concept of, for example, writing a speech and getting it cleared so that you can't change it when you're on the way to give it – this flummoxed him. Sometimes he'd be completely rewriting something and I'd say, "You can't do that. You might change a couple words here and there, but, no, you can't rewrite this. This has been cleared by 15 people."

And the other thing was handling classified. As far as Harold was concerned, if it was in his office it was safe, because we locked the door at night. So we were always looking out for him. Even traveling, he didn't understand that if you had classified in your suitcase, it wasn't safe if it was out of your sight. So we had some training to do of somebody who came through academia who didn't always realize how the bureaucracy works. Of course, sometimes when you see the bureaucracy through somebody else's eyes it looks kind of stupid, as well. If you leave your suitcase with your classified in it in the care of some Secret Service agents, why would you get a security violation, those kinds of questions.

But at any rate, he was just delightful to work for and so smart. I know you're going to ask me about any specific anecdotes that I remember and certainly the one that I remember the best is Pinochet, because Pinochet was arrested and detained when we were on the job.

Q: Was this when he was detained in Chile or when he was arrested in Spain?

GERSON: In Spain, on this extraterritorial warrant and so of course there were immediate meetings in the Department. I don't even know that DRL would have been necessarily thought of as an office that should attend those meetings, but we certainly did. The initial discussions were all about our relationship with Chile. Almost every argument was built on WHA's perspective. L, the legal adviser's office, also marshaled their views on extraterritoriality and what the Pinochet case would mean for various figures or former figures in the U.S. government. And all these other discussions were going on,

with Harold Koh and Charlie Brown in attendance. Charlie was a Schedule C employee and was the head of our public affairs and outreach section, very smart guy, from a human rights background. He and Harold were the voices reminding everyone: "Human rights, human rights, human rights!" It was almost like the other issues were way more important than DRL's perspective.

At those meetings that I attended (there were a series of them right away, nearly every day) we were trying to craft what the U.S. government's response to the arrest and the extradition request would be. We were conspicuously late with our response as a government. Those were very frustrating meetings, because it was as if the human rights aspect was somehow irrelevant, as if DRL was just an annoyance. At the end of a few days of meetings, the Secretary wanted to hear what the experts' recommendation was. She wanted all the players there in her office and Harold had to travel.

So I, who had not even been at all of the preliminary meetings and certainly was not eloquent like Harold, had to speak in his stead. I think Under Secretary Tom Pickering was there and then the highest ranking officer from each of these other offices, the Legal Adviser and other key representatives, were assembled in the Secretary's outer office, in the area with the fireplace. And I'm just thinking, "Oh, my gosh, they're probably not even going to call on me, so I'm going to have to really try to insert myself," knowing that we were the outriders on this issue. But somehow reports of our debates had been getting through to the Secretary, so when Pickering introduced the issue, he didn't ignore DRL's position in his initial summary, and the first thing the Secretary said when she spoke was, "Well, what are we going to do about this bum?" only I think she used a stronger word, and I could feel the change in the room, because everybody realized that she wanted to do something, not be mealy mouthed about the situation. So all the participants then turned to me and I spoke about the DRL position. I can't remember the details of the outcome, but we made some sort of a U.S. statement that at least emphasized human rights and the fact that Pinochet had to be held accountable for his past offenses.

But it was just very interesting, because all of a sudden DRL's position was important to the Secretary and my office became significant in the whole debate. Now, there was a downside of such high level attention. I always got to work at 6:00 in the morning, so before anyone else would even be there, sometimes the Secretary's office would already be on the phone asking for talking points for something at 8:00 in a very specific format. There wasn't even an office management specialist in by then to help you with the product. I remember many a morning when Harold and I were sitting there trying to prepare something for the Secretary's office and hoping for the secretaries to get in early enough to put it in the required format. But DRL became important and involved in many high-level issues.

One other thing I remember is that the last day of the fiscal year, I had spent all of the bureau's money because you don't want to be caught at the end of the year with unused money and lose it. It had all been earmarked when the East Timor situation came up and literally, on the 29th of September, in the evening, the Department decided that Harold

Koh and an interagency group would fly to East Timor the next day. I needed to get sufficient money back out of the budget immediately, because nobody was going to give us the money to respond to the emergency. So I was sitting there pulling money back from computer purchases or other budget items and organizing travel to Dili, organizing a charter plane, figuring out who was going to be on this team, and getting travel orders and visas in literally one day, and it was incredible. We did make it all happen and the group went the next day.

But everything was always urgent. DRL was the first job where I started carrying a cell phone all the time. Inevitably, I would be in the frozen food section of the supermarket clearing a cable for the Ops Center. So it was very interesting.

Q: And involved in virtually all of the issues, worldwide.

GERSON: Absolutely. In addition to the regular activities like getting ready for our position on the Human Rights Commission meetings, which would mean liaison with the IO bureau, and the production of the human rights report, the first religious freedom report, all of which were massive undertakings, we always were hit by these crises that didn't have a precedent for how to deal with them.

Then in addition, as the PDAS I dealt with trying to get the right equipment for people and all of the personnel issues. Our support staff was not uniformly good, and there were often multiple absences on any given day. It was a laugh, when I left the bureau and they gave me a farewell party, one of the things somebody said was, "Who are we going to call now when it's snowing, to tell her that we can't get in to work?" And that was the laugh, because I was always there, no matter what. When there was a little poor weather, half of the staff wouldn't come to work, particularly on the support staff side. And when you're doing cables and things that have to go up to the Secretary's office in certain formats and be cleared in certain ways you need that support staff as much as you need the drafters. Often it was very challenging to keep the office running.

We also had a lot of interns, Presidential Management Interns (PMI), who were exceptionally good, especially those working in the office that compiled the human rights reports. At least half of those people, I think, seemed to be Presidential Management Interns, really exceptionally qualified.

Q: Really? They used to use retirees for that.

GERSON: As well, but on a regular basis, throughout the year, the PMI's were pretty prevalent. A couple of them I still see. Many have come into the Service or been given Civil Service appointments.

Q: You were talking, in the case of Pinochet, about other bureaus of the State Department really regarding human rights as a side issue. Was that something that you found prevalent within the Department?

GERSON: Absolutely. DRL's desk officers had to have very good relationships with the regional bureaus. Otherwise, your issues would just either get overlooked or be managed by others, and you wouldn't have the opportunity to influence the policy.

Q: And DRL regarded as something of an annoyance, I suppose?

GERSON: Absolutely, an annoyance. It was occasionally difficult for DRL's Foreign Service officers when they wanted to get onward assignments. Sometimes the regional bureau that they had to work with disliked them because they were often at odds on issues, and that was the bureau where they hoped to have an onward assignment. So it was a real dilemma: how do you maintain your intellectual and moral integrity and actually get your onward assignment, although I did see that work very well for a number of people who, although they were at odds with the bureau on occasion, maintained a very professional attitude. In some cases, the regional bureau welcomed the DRL officer's scrappiness and actually invited them to bid on good jobs in the region.

Q: How about you? Did you find yourself in conflict with the bureaus a lot?

GERSON: Occasionally. Pinochet was one issue. Human rights report time was another. I actually had two tenures with DRL. The second was after my bone marrow transplants. When I came back for an interim period before I was able to go overseas again, I worked as a senior advisor on the actual human rights report preparation process. That's where you came into the most conflict with the regional bureaus. You'd get the report drafted by various embassies, you would edit it, and you would add to it information that you'd been compiling throughout the year. DRL was always on the lookout for clientitis in the reports as well as during the editing process.

There were terms of art that you used, you wanted each report to be consistent in certain ways, the way you described an overall human rights situation. DRL used some pretty standard language, particular ways that you described things. And we would often come into conflict with a regional bureau, because the bureau wanted to use the report to send a little pat on the back for somebody or a government that they liked. But that wasn't the point of the human rights reports. The reports had to be as objective as possible, and the standard phraseology helped ensure that objective.

Q: I want to pursue that, but let me make sure we have the chronology right, as well. You started in DRL in?

GERSON: I started in DRL, probably it was around mid to late '98, because I'd come back from Geneva in the summer of 1997, and I'd done those couple of months at the Board of Examiners and eight months at OES.

Q: So mid '98 and you stayed with them for how long?

GERSON: Until March of 2000.

Q: About two years, then.

GERSON: Maybe slightly less, in the PDAS capacity.

Q: And then you left for medical reasons and came back directly to them again?

GERSON: And came back 10 months later.

Q: So you were gone for 10 months and then you were back for another year or something like that?

GERSON: No, it would only have been about five or six months, because by the summer of 2001, I was headed to Canada.

Q: All right, now let's go back to some of the issues. During my tenure in DRL, I sometimes felt like I was the internal NGO in the State Department. Did you get that feeling sometimes?

GERSON: Yes, pretty much, reminding them of human rights issues.

Q: Being a gadfly and sometimes tilting at windmills and so forth?

Now, you mentioned Pinochet. Can you remember any others where you particularly won one or lost one? China, for example, always a big human rights issue.

GERSON: We always had a recurring issue, of course, during the lead up to the Human Rights Commission. We always had to decide whether we would or would not have a resolution condemning China. The regional bureau was never too keen on introducing that resolution, and I can recall one year I don't think we did bring a resolution, but the other years we would regularly stress the importance of introducing one.

I also remember when Madeleine Albright was going to address the Human Rights Commission one year. I had a falling out kind of early on in my DRL tenure with Wendy Sherman, the Counselor of the State Department, who was a very close associate of Madeleine Albright. It was not something overt. I simply knew that I had done something that Wendy didn't like, but I had to take the position I did that led to a cooling of our interactions, or at least that is how I perceived the relationship.

The issue involved Hurricane Mitch. Mitch caused incredible devastation in Central America with massive flooding and landslides, primarily in Honduras and Nicaragua. Wendy Sherman was asked, I guess by the Secretary, to head the working group that would decide the U.S. response. Every relevant bureau was summoned to a working group, and DRL was one of the group members. Representation was supposed to be at the PDAS level and I represented DRL.

And the issue was: what risk was there to good governance as a result of all the money

we were going to send in to help in the relief effort. Was there going to be a risk to the democratic development of these countries?

I attended the first couple of meetings and listened carefully. I read all the documents that USAID (U.S. Agency for International Development) had produced on its assistance in the region. I was supposed to find all the money the U.S. government was already spending on human rights and democracy development, because DRL didn't have money per se. The issue was to find programs we could leverage. We were not a bureau that had a lot of money to give out, and a lot of our money was already committed to Kosovo, because we were very active in what was going on in Kosovo. So I was a little nervous about what the Hurricane Mitch effort would entail.

Wendy Sherman was going to go down to the region, with I think Peter Romero, who was the acting Assistant Secretary in WHA at the time. And she'd been emphasizing the risk to democracy because of the influx of money to the area. I asked if I could go too. First of all, I just didn't see it as a DRL priority and wanted to be clear on the need.

Q: I'm not sure I understand the issue here. The idea is that if you give hurricane aid it's going to hurt democracy?

GERSON: Give a lot of money, it could be diverted by the local administrators and this would actually break down good governance and eventually democracy. I couldn't see it, either, Peter, and that was the problem. I tried to listen, I tried to understand where would I look for the risks, how I could possibly identify the risks, what would I do to counteract the risks. I just didn't see it. I didn't see it at all.

And AID, in my humble opinion, was allegedly spending x million dollars on democracy and good governance in the area, but when I looked at the documents where they outlined all of their programs I couldn't see much, if any, programming geared towards good governance, despite titles that suggested there was a link.

I was not invited on this trip that Wendy said was just going to be for her and Peter Romero, but it ended up that AID went and a number of other people as well, but not DRL. And after attending a few more working group meetings, I decided to send someone at a lower level just to monitor the meetings in case there was anything to be picked up where DRL had a real role, but I determined that there was no risk and we were not going to redirect money from Kosovo and other projects to something that was so intangible. And of course, as it turned out, there was absolutely no risk to democracy from misappropriation of the relief effort. But, somehow, I felt that I had jeopardized my relationship with Wendy Sherman as a result of my choice, or, at least that's how I felt.

Now let me hop back to China and the Human Rights Commission and the fact that the Secretary was going to speak there. There are certain protocols when a senior government representative speaks in the opening sessions. The Secretary's staff was preparing the speech, and I was to be a part of this process. The person coordinating the effort was Wendy Sherman. I remember sitting in her office with a couple of other advisors, and

they were discussing language to condemn China. Madeleine Albright was going to single out China in her speech.

And I said, "I think that's great. I like the way the speech is sounding but let me remind you that it is not considered good protocol in the Human Rights Commission context to mention a country by name in speeches that are made by the high level government representative, and it's very likely that when the Secretary mentions China the Chinese will take their placard and begin banging it on the table or will walk out. What is important is that the Secretary speaks after the EU (European Union) representative. What we've done in the past when we wanted to single out China or Cuba is make sure that the EU representative also does the same thing. I wouldn't want the Secretary to be caught unawares or be embarrassed by this. It is simply that it is very likely that the Chinese will disrupt her speech."

So Wendy took this advice on board with interest, because, of course, her job was to protect the Secretary, and no one else at the meeting knew that that could happen. The Secretary placed a call to her EU counterpart, who said he also intended to make a statement. I don't think the Chinese actually did bang their placards, if I recall, because they'd already had this happen enough that maybe they decided that that behavior was getting old.

Now that I've been talking, I remember one other area where we really clashed with a bureau, but it was a functional bureau – the Office of the Legal Adviser. We clashed repeatedly on indigenous issues. When I was DCM in Geneva, I had been invited to observe some of the meetings that the indigenous peoples held on the margins of the Human Rights Commission. There were always one or two indigenous issues working group meetings every year. And I realized how contentious the issues were. I heard some of the indigenous representatives from the U.S., particularly one lady from Alaska, just seem very, very combative. I didn't really understand all the issues at the outset. All I knew is that I didn't want to be stuck in a room with such a contentious group of people.

And then all of a sudden there I was in DRL, and as the PDAS I was asked to spearhead the U.S. role in the resolution on the rights of indigenous peoples and go to Geneva and make the official speeches and work with these groups. This was a bit frightening, but with great confidence, I headed off to Geneva in my new role. Harold Koh had just come on board as DRL's Assistant Secretary. I don't think he had been on board a month when the first indigenous forum occurred.

And we had this draft declaration and our liaison in the Office of the Legal Adviser was a lawyer who no longer works on indigenous issues. He was a nice guy, but he was as conservative on indigenous issues as one could find. He was conservative in his interpretation of what we could or couldn't say and what the role of L was as the guardian of the law. I always saw L's role as helping policy makers get to where they wanted to go. You want to achieve a goal. Let L walk you through the minefields to get there. His view was that L was there to say no, at least from my observation.

When I'd worked with him on other issues in conjunction with the Human Rights Commission when I was in Geneva I'd never seen this aspect of the L relationship because I guess we weren't working on the same type of issues. But all of a sudden we were trying to craft a statement, an opening statement to make in this meeting of the working group on the rights of indigenous peoples, and nothing that I wanted to say was acceptable to L's representative.

We had three or four issues we had to address. One was whether we could use the word "peoples." The second was group versus individual rights. There were four areas that we had to touch on in the speech, but what I wanted to say about all four and what I knew the indigenous people wanted us to move on, L would not give way on.

So I went to Geneva with this speech in hand. I was just trembling in my boots, because I had to make this statement in front of some people that I had met there before. They were very disappointed, and I was very upset that I had to make such an uncompromising statement. And in fact, if you Google my name and indigenous issues, that statement is on the Internet as a retrograde statement by the U.S. Government. And, in fact, once I was interviewing a visa applicant in Ottawa, and at the interview window, he must have seen my name on my ID tag, and he said, "Are you the person who used to work on indigenous issues?" I thought, "Oh, my gosh, this is embarrassing! He probably read that statement or studied it at university."

At any rate, I made this really egregious statement, but in the long run it actually worked out. Afterwards I met in small groups with indigenous representatives without the L representative there, and they understood that I was not comfortable with that statement. These are often unproductive working groups. You've got 30 governments sitting around in a room. The Danes are willing to agree to the resolution immediately, because all of their indigenous peoples are in one place, Greenland, and they are happy to give them a great deal of independence. So they're way on one side and we're way on the other side. Some places, like Latin America, don't even think they have indigenous people, they pretend that they don't have any indigenous, even though they have populations living practically in servitude who self identify as indigenous. These were very, very difficult working groups; at the outset you've already broken down over "peoples." Most countries had no problem with "peoples" as a word to describe indigenous groups, but the U.S. sure did.

Q: Now, just to clarify, the debate here between indigenous "people" and indigenous "peoples"...

GERSON: "Peoples" recognizes groups almost as a government with a right to have …

Q: "Peoples" have the right to self-determination.

GERSON: Exactly.

Q: And "people" don't, so ...

GERSON: And "people" are just people, of different backgrounds who happen to be living in countries, but they don't have any special group identity.

Q: And this got to be one of the great human rights debates of our age?

GERSON: That's right, and the indigenous groups had taken some extreme positions, in an effort to have a position that they could compromise down from. The interpretations went from one extreme to the other. The indigenous representatives and the participating governments had been working on this for years, and they hadn't been getting anywhere at all.

I spent literally almost two years working on this resolution and the underlying U.S. Government positions quietly in Washington. I even organized an academic forum, bringing experts from across the country. We brought professors from universities, we brought people who'd studied these issues of self-determination, peoples, group rights for years. We had a closed two-day seminar on the four contentious issues. We, of course, invited L as well as representatives from regional bureaus. The participants came down overwhelmingly in favor of the use of "peoples", among other things.

But the answer from L was still "No!" It was just incredible that they could listen to people that are far more experienced and renowned than they were on the issue and the answer was, "No!" And finally we tried to work this through the White House, because we understood that some of the White House staff were favorable to DRL's position. Soon after I left DRL the White House made a command decision that, "You will use 'peoples.'"

Q: And, asylum, was DRL involved in that issue?

GERSON: Well, asylum is a very difficult issue. Asylum was actually handled by the same office within our bureau that prepared human rights reports. I think the original idea was that when the staff was not working on the human rights reports they could pore over thousands of requests from judges around the country to review individual asylum cases. It was just in the judiciary's protocol that if somebody came up for an asylum hearing, you automatically sent a notice off to DRL, which was supposed to do what?

Something like 80 percent, or a very, very significant number, possibly even higher than 80 percent, of all the requests for asylum were from Mexican citizens. Well, at one point, when Chiapas was really a really big issue, some of the applications had real merit. But what we wanted to do was have the judges refer to the human rights report first to determine whether or not an asylum request from an individual from a certain country was even likely to have any chance. But, no, a request for review just automatically seemed to find its way to DRL without consideration based on existing source information.

DRL simply couldn't look at all of those requests or even do triage.

So I'm not even certain how a few cases got to our attention. Probably because the cases were brought to our attention by somebody else, because we wouldn't have even known which case to zero in on when huge Xerox cartons came full of these cases. How could you look through them all?

The human rights report took a few months. You started in September and you finished in January. But then work on the religious freedom report started right after the human rights report was published. So that office didn't even have time to be looking at the asylum cases. This is an issue even today. There have been a few complaints and criticisms that we weren't vetting the asylum cases that carefully. That was true, but we didn't have the resources to do any better.

And every once in a while you would see a request and you'd write something up saying, "Yes, it's very likely that in this time, in this place, this would have been a problem that might result in persecution of someone." But you can't know that person x actually had a problem in the Congo. But sometimes we did do things like reach out and ask the embassy to advise if this individual was on a blacklist, of if this individual who claimed to be associated with an opposition figure was really at risk. But those cases were few and far between, considering the thousands of cases that we received.

Q: Did some of these become big political issues that came up to the PDAS level?

GERSON: Not that I recall. I think we had one or two where I actually reviewed the brief before it went back to the requestor, but it was not common. And to be perfectly honest, I'm sure there were months when nobody looked at the boxes of asylum cases, because it was nearly impossible to wade through a box that has one thousand Mexican cases in it and find the one Somali? Very flawed process at the time.

Q: And it continues the same way, as far as you know?

GERSON: Well, I understand there's been attention given to it, but I don't really know what happened, whether the judges are actually reading the human rights reports first and determining whether the case in question meets some criteria that would warrant a request for DRL's review so that the request would actually have a chance to be looked at.

Q: Well, let's talk about the human rights report for a minute, because that's one of the things the bureau is best known for. I know it takes a tremendous amount of effort from many, many people in the bureau. As PDAS, did you find yourself much involved in that?

GERSON: Particularly at the end of the report process. Not as it was being pulled together but when it would already be almost final, where the report staff was massaging the reports, where people that worked on individual reports were submitting their rewrites and updates to the regional bureaus. When DRL and the regional bureau couldn't resolve some disagreement then it would work its way up and sometimes right up to the Assistant

Secretary, particularly when the report involved Israel and the occupied territories.

I remember one year we had a big problem because in the introductory chapter that outlined themes for the year DRL mentioned Bhutan, just mentioned it in this introductory piece along with some other countries with tarnished human rights records. Somebody in the regional bureau wanted that out. I might be wrong about the country, but it was an extremely small country, and the bureau wanted that name suppressed for the overview piece.

And then you'd get people who had a particular country they wanted in the report, because they had some issue that they wanted highlighted. So you would have, let's say, Bhutan highlighted more than Colombia.

Colombia was always a problem at report time. Disagreements over wording often went up to the top level, because the focus of the human rights report is human rights infractions committed by governments. So naturally if you've got rebels, although you will mention their abuses, who are you going to hold responsible? The report chronicles the government's efforts and abuses, not those of non-governmental agents.

So in a place like Colombia, where we would talk about extrajudicial killings and paramilitaries and so forth, of course we mentioned the guerillas. But the bureau and later the government itself would get very upset, because it seemed that the government were always mentioned first. Well, the report is to review governments' performance. You can't say, "The government killed 200 people, but let's talk about the guerillas for the next few pages." Who do you hold responsible for non-governmental infractions?

So you always had these debates. I remember one year and when I was actually working as the senior advisor, helping prepare the reports, we had one section that talked about the equality of women, and there was always a line or statement about how many women were in government. And there were three Nordic countries that had, let's say they had 100 parliamentary representatives, and 49 were women and 51 were men. I felt it was quite appropriate to say that women were equally represented in government. No, some of the DRL staff wanted to highlight the inequity, because it wasn't exactly 50-50. Well, this is a case where I, as the senior advisor, took the side of the regional bureaus. I felt it was absolutely insane to say that they were doing well but they hadn't quite made it. What would we have said if they had 51 women and 49 men? Why were we splitting hairs here? But some people working on these reports just said, "No, it's not equal so we've got to use our formula that says it's not equal." I just felt that was the most ridiculous thing I'd ever heard, so in that negotiation, I came down on the side of the regional bureaus.

Q: You started to talk about West Bank-Israel and, leading into an even broader question, did you find that in fact you were satisfied with the way the human rights reports came out, that different countries were treated equally?

GERSON: I think so. Some certainly got a great deal more attention from the media and

the Congress.

Q: Cuba, for example. It would be easy to write a tough report.

GERSON: No problem!

Q: Everybody would be happy with it. But, Israel, could you write a tough report in the same fashion?

GERSON: That was sometimes a problem. I can't remember exactly all the details that we argued over: extrajudicial killings, torture, prison conditions. Some people just didn't want to have anything critical written about "their" country and yet it was out there, we had documentation, we consulted with human rights entities that visited prisoners, we got all their testimonies in. We maintained this documentation very assiduously and if the embassy tried to write something that looked like a whitewash we would pull out our files, "Excuse me, but Human Rights Watch said x and would you please comment on this."

I remember talking with, I think it was Kazakhstan, representatives of the foreign ministry came to talk about the human rights report and to try to show us that they'd made progress in certain areas. Because they'd improved one thing, they thought somehow it was going to make other infractions just fine, and we'd write a new, more positive report.

Q: So, a lot of clientitis out there?

GERSON: A lot of clientitis. But sometimes folks would just dig in their heels on a comment like on the equal representation of women in parliaments, and we could just change one word and the critic would be satisfied even though DRL's essential meaning would still be there.

Q: So there weren't things which actually went up to the Secretary of State for decision on this?

GERSON: The only report disputes that I remember ever getting that high, they may have gone to D (the Deputy Secretary), were Colombia and the occupied territories-Israel.

Q: And how did Human Rights Watch and other NGO's regard this whole process?

GERSON: Well, I think they respected it, but often their own reports were considerably more critical. But we did meet with NGOs. If NGOs wanted to meet with us on a situation in a certain country we did talk with them and certainly kept all their input. But as soon as the report was completed, you'd work late into the night printing out the copies that you took over to Congress. It was always a very long night.

Usually in the next day or two DRL received comments from the human rights community, either congratulating you or saying, "Well, this is fine, but we would have preferred to have a greater emphasis on x or y." But I think in general we had a pretty good relationship with the NGOs on issues. The big question always was, of course, why we never wrote anything about ourselves.

Q: Not the State Department's job to write about the United States.

GERSON: But sometimes you really did feel a little bit ridiculous arguing over certain things. For example, this issue of representation of women, which was certainly not a major problem in the entire spectrum of human rights issues. Where would the U.S. have stood in that? And yet we were arguing over whether Denmark had equal representation of women and men in parliament when they were one person away from 50-50.

Q: And the Congress liked the reports?

GERSON: Usually.

Q: Generally liked DRL?

GERSON: Yes, they did. As I told you, there was a generous earmark for DRL for one year. We had some people like Tom Lantos and others, very, very pro-DRL, who worked hard on certain issues, the religious freedom issue for one. I remember going up to the Hill a couple of times and testifying or attending small meetings. There was always pretty good respect for DRL. I heard this anecdotally, but when Harold Koh left, and the administration was going to be looking for someone to replace him, I heard a few congressmen, across the board, Republican and Democrat, had been saying, "They'll never get anybody like Harold again." There was a very good relationship.

Q: Interestingly, in Congress you would have even the right wing Republicans and the left wing Democrats all pretty much backing DRL?

GERSON: Yeah, some of the people didn't bother with DRL at all. It just wasn't in their sphere of concern. But those that we worked with, that followed human rights and democracy issues, as I recall there was quite good cooperation.

Q: You'd mentioned a couple of other issues earlier but we really didn't talk about them, as sort of empires of their own within DRL, the religious freedom group, for example. Now, did they pretty much run their own business?

GERSON: Well, we tried to keep some control over it, because after all not only did the person that came in to lead the religious freedom office not have any experience with the State Department, but the original staff was cobbled together. It was very hard because when we were recruiting for that office, nobody already in DRL wanted to go to the religious freedom office. Most liked the jobs they already had. And when we put out the new office's job description we attracted some candidates initially who had a strong

opinion about the role that they would like religion to play in society. Some candidates were focused on that single issue and they might have had a hard time putting their issue in a larger context. There were some growing pains as the office was set up and matured. So there was always monitoring to try to make sure that the office kept abreast of everything else we were trying to do and how their priorities fit in with overall bureau goals.

And starting anything from scratch is always very hard. Where do you go with this? What should it really be doing? Because, once again, Congress set something up and didn't prescribe exactly what it was going to do. So you have a handful of people that are going to create something. And apart from having the religious freedom report, what else are these people going to do? And when the head of this office goes and makes a speech somewhere, is the DRL Assistant Secretary going to clear it?

Q: And did you?

GERSON: I recall, yes, certainly at the beginning, but I'm not certain whether we did for everything. Harold Koh decided how he was going to work with the head of the religious freedom office. I'm not sure about all the agreements that they made with each other.

And later we had somebody come in as the labor advisor in a similar capacity. It was a little bit easier to work with that office, because the office had existed as a subset of DRL before the arrival of the advisor, whereas with the religious freedom office the advisor came first and the office developed around him.

Q: Were there any big labor issues that you can recall during the time?

GERSON: Indonesia. Mainly sweatshop issues, labor organizing issues, but I don't recall anything that really became overwhelming.

Q: At one point in the distant past I remember that office used to concentrate on promoting the free trade unions versus the communist trade unions, but I guess that was a relic of the past by that time.

GERSON: I sometimes wondered what they did all the time. Of course there were labor officers out in the field, and they monitored their reporting and so forth. I don't recall them being particularly directive of initiatives worldwide. It was a small office.

Q: We've talked a lot about different issues from a human rights perspective but one that you mentioned only in passing that must have been one of your biggest issues was Kosovo.

GERSON: We actually earmarked a lot of our money for Kosovo.

Q: Now, can I ask, was this when the big Kosovo crisis was going on?

GERSON: Yes, and we had an officer, sort of a maverick Foreign Service officer, who managed this portfolio. He had formerly been a record promoter or something in the entertainment business, and so he was a real wheeler dealer and kind of flew outside the bureaucracy much of the time, but he got things done. He was always out there, trying to work on setting up offices, setting up processes, development, how to spend the money, who could be good partners, as I recall. It's one of these things where you're just flailing around looking for a way to advance a human rights and democracy program, and this officer was just the right person at the time. He seemed to meet all the right people. The details escape me right now, and yet I know that he and I spent a lot of time together on budget and priority setting.

I know I also spent a fair amount of time getting him out of hot water. Often there would be meetings at a high level on Kosovo. I remember one, I believe it was in Paris, where he just inserted himself into the meeting when he wasn't supposed to be in the room. We were always getting complaints from S that he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to exert influence when it was really not up to an FS-03 DRL officer to be intervening.

Yet, he knew how to make things happen and how to meet the right people. DRL was trying to decide how to spend the money and we had to make sure that the right programs were funded.

Q: Other big issues that came around?

GERSON: Well, we had corporate responsibility. We had a DAS who I think came in to replace me when I became PDAS. Bennett Freeman was his name. I think he had worked previously in a number of other places in government. Bennett was another wheeler dealer. He and the Kosovo officer I mentioned earlier were two peas in a pod, one older, one younger. Bennett developed a program on corporate responsibility, which was really how big corporate entities should be responsible for operating in a climate of good governance and human rights awareness.

So certainly that was an area, corporate responsibility, where we developed a program that wasn't there at all before our tenure in DRL. I believe Bennett has now left government service, but I believe he's still involved in that whole issue, working with the big companies on good governance. So that was something that grew out of an initiative by DRL.

Q: Did you travel a lot?

GERSON: Not too much. I went to the Human Rights Commission maybe once and to indigenous meetings at least once, if not twice. But most of the traveling was done by the Assistant Secretary or the desk officers, who might visit the countries they covered.

Q: It sounds like you were spending an awful lot of time managing the bureau and putting out the big fires and presumably that was because Harold was off on the road

much of the time.

GERSON: The staff of DRL's multilateral affairs office were in Geneva for a lot of these meetings, so somebody had to be back in the bureau on a daily basis. So that was me.

Q: Anything else you want to say about DRL?

GERSON: Very interesting to work on the Seventh Floor and be on the front lines of a lot of high profile issues. I had to leave because I had a medical issue, but I probably couldn't have lasted too much longer anyway, because the pressures were quite intense. I don't think I ever worked under 12 hours and quite frequently, certain times of the year, 14 or 16 hours per day. The inbox just never went down. There was always something.

Q: Now was Harold still there when you left?

GERSON: He was, and he remained, I think, at least another year.

Q: Okay, at this point were you back into the bidding cycle again?

GERSON: Well, not right away. I left to go to Seattle for bone marrow transplants. So I was actually out of the workplace for about 10 months. I knew when I came back from Seattle that I wouldn't be able to go anywhere right away because I would have no medical clearance. That's why it was arranged that I would come back and work on the human rights report as a senior advisor for a few months.

But, actually, while I was in Seattle for the bone marrow transplants it was bidding time, but how could I know, I didn't even know if I was going to live, much less seriously put in bids. But I do recall that one week after my second transplant, I was not feeling really great, I got a call from my CDO, who asked me if I wanted to be on a list for an ambassadorship. I got kind of excited, because it was a country that I would actually consider, because I had never wanted to be an ambassador, but there's maybe a handful of countries that you say, "Well, actually, I could probably work there." And after thinking about it and calling MED, one week after my transplant, when I hadn't even started to reject the donated marrow yet and could still be dead in two weeks, trying to convince MED that I should be cleared. "Okay, you could go to country x as ambassador, but only if you travel to a neighboring country to have your blood work done regularly." Finally I just called my CDO up and said, "You know, not only take me off that list, I just don't want to be called again about being an ambassador."

So I went to work for CA, which is my home bureau. The Assistant Secretary there was still Mary Ryan.

Q: Consular Affairs.

GERSON: That's right, and Mary was holding Canada for me, the minister counselor that coordinated consular work in Canada, stationed in Ottawa, because she knew that would

be the only place I could conceivably get a clearance so soon after my transplants.

Q: Now this is a little different from the previous time, when EUR was supposedly holding Canada for you?

GERSON: Right, different type of job, and this was not an EUR job, this was a CA job.

Q: And would this have been an Ottawa job?

GERSON: Yes, and so when it became obvious that I wasn't going to die right away, that was what I knew I was going to do in the summer of 2001. So I just took bridge assignments until then.

Q: And this was to be in charge of all consular affairs in Canada?

GERSON: Right, as well as run the consular section in Ottawa, which is not Canada's largest consular section, but it is where all the diplomatic visas are done and where consular work is coordinated.

Q: So this is a big job, again. How many consulates were you overseeing there?

GERSON: Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec, and Halifax, so that's six along with Ottawa itself. I thought, "This is going to be a piece of cake." But I arrived towards the end of July 2001. What happened in September 2001? Then all hell broke loose.

Not only on that very day did all hell break loose, but also for my remaining time there, particularly the first two of the three years that I was there. People don't realize that in Canada the only people who get visas are immigrants or people from all over the world who are already working in the States who travel to Canada to renew their visas. And Canada attracts a huge number of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent, including Pakistanis, has a very large number of Iranian immigrants, and of course a lot of the people traveling from the U.S. to get their visas renewed in Canada are from those nationalities, as well as people who are subject to technology transfer clearances. So our workload just sky rocketed when all of the new requirements for those people were imposed without any bureaucracy in place to implement those requirements.

But our problems started on 9/11 itself, because all the airplanes in the sky headed for the United States were forced to land elsewhere. They either returned to their home country, or if they were already well engaged on their flights, where did most of them put down? Canada. And not in Ottawa or Toronto or Montreal, with few exceptions, where a person could get out and rent a car or get on a Greyhound bus. No, Goose Bay, Labrador; Nova Scotia; Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories.

So we had Americans and others stuck all over Canada when they needed to get to the U.S. Thank goodness it was Canada, because the Canadians were wonderful. People

invited stranded passengers to stay in their homes. But some of these places didn't even have homes. They were remote bases, and passengers were sleeping on cots and in makeshift facilities in hangars. Americans, with their tremendous sense of geography: "Well why can't we just get on a train?" "Man, have you looked at where you are?" "There are no cars available for rent here!" "Well, of course not! You're on frozen tundra! It's going to take you 10 days of driving to get down to the United States." Some people even bought used cars to try to get home.

But of course in that immediate onslaught of "How can we talk to our family? Where are we? How can we get home? I'm going to miss my wedding! I'm going to miss my surgery!" we had all these insurmountable problems, and what can you do? Halifax airport had so many planes on the tarmac that when the planes were finally ready to fly, the first plane that arrived in Halifax was ready to leave, it couldn't, because it had 28 planes blocking it on the tarmac.

People just didn't understand the problems that a lot of these airports had and then you'd have people saying, "I don't want to go back to Moscow! I'm so much closer to home!" but the airline wasn't going to be able to take care of the person if they didn't get on that plane and fly back to Moscow first. Then they could at least start them again. That might work if you were Russian, but it wasn't real great if you were American.

Q: Yeah, especially if you were on vacation or something.

GERSON: Exactly. So that was our first crisis. And this job that was supposed to be easy for a person who was still on immunosuppressants and steroids and was supposed to work at a relaxed pace became all of a sudden an extremely challenging job.

Q: And this must have started to affect our relationship with the Canadians, as well?

GERSON: Not really. They were very good supporters this whole time, and within a week we had almost all the stranded passengers home.

But the harder problem developed over the next year or maybe a year and a half. The U.S. changed the rules for persons that are landed immigrants in Canada, the equivalent of green card holders in the U.S. Those people had always been exempt from visas. Canada is a country of immigrants. There are only 30 million Canadians. Most of them are grouped within 100 miles of the U.S. border. Detroit's car industry relies on just-in-time deliveries of parts made in Canada that cross over the border every day. Almost all of the Canadian trucks are driven by Pakistani drivers.

So, all of a sudden the U.S. changes its requirement that these landed immigrants can travel visa-free and we say that on a certain date they're all going to need visas. We did a study on the impact, with the help of the Canadian government. Our best estimate was that six hundred thousand additional people could possibly require visas. Well, even if you take that down and say that one fourth of them are working age and would need a visa, all of a sudden, a place like Calgary's workload could double or triple overnight.

Plus, how do you get the word out? We had radio briefings, we placed newspaper articles.

Then, in addition, many visa applicants required special processing. This new process for people born in certain countries was called Visas Condor. Those cases required additional administrative processing. How do you do that and keep the truck driver driving? There were 20 or so countries that required this special processing. A list was printed in the New York Times, which was slightly erroneous but more or less accurate, but that was retracted and you weren't allowed to tell people that their country was on the list. So they would come in for a visa to go to a wedding in two days, a wedding that a week earlier they would have gone across the border and no one would have cared and now they need special processing. Not only is the processing going to take longer to be completed, but it might never come back because the first year, the first summer, the summer of 2002, not one name was clearing.

We heard all sorts of rumors: the FBI was researching by hand, their computers didn't interface with others, and you've probably subsequently seen things in the newspaper about the FBI's computer system. The agencies didn't speak to one another. So we were sending the required requests with people's names, dates and places of birth, and they weren't going anywhere.

In addition, we had people who were working in the States, who came to Canada simply to renew a visa and they couldn't go back, because there had been a provision earlier that a person that crossed the border with Canada or Mexico for less than 29 days could do something called auto-revalidation of their visa. In other words, even if their visa had expired they could reenter the U.S., because they hadn't "really" been out. Well, that rule was changed too. So, all of a sudden people were coming out to Canada in ignorance, having always renewed their visa in Canada, and they were told, "You can't go back to the hospital where you're the chief surgeon next week, because it'll take maybe forever."

There were countries, the "axis of evil" countries, there were six at the time, those we were at least allowed to publicize. But we had to find some creative solutions for the others, since we couldn't tell people about this list of countries requiring additional processing, which had already been published largely in the New York Times. We had to work something out.

I finally was able to get the State Department to agree to a work around for Canada and for Mexico as well, because the same call center that set appointments for Canadians also managed appointments along the Mexican border. The call center worked under my coordination, so this was a Canada-wide and northern part of Mexico solution for Stateside cases, as they're called, where people were used to renewing their visas in one day and going back home to resume work or school. But how were we going to warn them that they couldn't come over the border on a routine visa renewal trip if we couldn't tell them that their home countries were on this list?

The State Department finally agreed to a scenario where the call center would send the

consulates at the end of each workday the names and nationalities of those on the upcoming appointment lists. Each consulate in Canada and northern Mexico would get the list of bookings, let's say, that were made that day for two weeks in the future. So, in other words, nobody could book today for tomorrow. They would be told when they were making their appointment, "If there's a problem we will call you back within two days. Do not make any confirmed travel plans yet. If you don't hear from us in two days you can go ahead and buy an airplane ticket for the appointment date you requested."

So what we would do is review every afternoon or the following morning the fax from the call center. We would look down the list, check where the people were born, and then we would give a list back to the call center, and we paid them to call some people back and say, "You will not be able to be processed in direct turnaround. You would have to plan on a minimum of x number of days in Canada. Please consider whether you need to have this visa renewed or not." At least they were warned.

Some people would come anyway. Usually, then, they would get in touch with us directly and say, "What can I do?" We could sometimes work out something. Let's say an Iranian was going home anyway to see his parents. Instead of coming up, getting the visa, going back to the States and flying from New York to Iran, we would take their case and then they would fly directly from Canada to Paris, Paris to Iran, and then come back through Ottawa when the visa was ready. So we were able to keep some people flying, but basically most of these people just had to wait and tough it out.

Q: Or go into illegal status in the United States?

GERSON: No, most of them were skilled workers. The only reason they needed to renew their visa would be if they needed to travel for work or family reasons. So a lot of people were putting off their work related travel or their home leave travel.

But the problem that first summer was that none of the processing was coming back, nothing. I had people stranded for months, people who'd been working at universities and were trying to keep their jobs. We were talking to them all of the time. And finally I said, "You know, I've had enough. We don't have any responses coming back." So the ambassador encouraged me …

Q: Who was?

GERSON: Paul Cellucci, who was a political appointee. He was a former governor of Massachusetts, one of the Republican governors group. He did not oppose my efforts to find a solution. It took me a while, but I drafted a cable that had to be compelling, not sob stories, but discussed the impact on the U.S. economy of having these people stranded abroad, what this meant for U.S. businesses and so forth. The just-in-time deliveries of car parts, the businessmen, the students at universities with big scholarships, professors at universities. And I crafted a cable, and it went in as a first person cable from the ambassador to the Secretary.

Literally the next day I got a call in the morning from the DCM: "Get up here, right now!" And I went tearing upstairs because all I could think of was that I was in trouble. Now the DCM, Steve Kelly, was quite a kidder, but he sounded really serious. I got up to the front office and he said, "Sit down." And then the ambassador appeared at some point behind me from his office and the ambassador said, "I want you to know that we just got a call from the Department, that the Secretary spent 20 minutes on your cable at the senior staff meeting."

This was Colin Powell. He apparently had no idea that things were this out of hand worldwide. Unfortunately, the poor CA representative at the senior staff meeting that day was the person who was the DAS for passports, but she was the one in the hot seat! I had actually chatted about the issue with someone in CA before I sent the telegram, but the passport DAS was unaware of the issue.

But the ambassador came in and he was so excited, because it's every ambassador's dream to have a cable that they have written get the Secretary's attention and for 20 minutes! And later, when we had one of these principal officers' conferences, where all of our consuls general met, and people came up from WHA and talked about different Canada issues, the DAS or whoever it was who represented WHA said, "There have been two really important cables from the hemisphere this year, influential cables, and one of them was the cable on the visa impasse."

And from that time on the clearances started coming through. Washington started focusing on the fact that the process was not working at all. And things finally started flowing, to where you could do something for an applicant. It was a horrible time, horrible time.

Q: But the pressure must have kept on for the rest of your assignment.

GERSON: Of course, and you were always trying to help individual people. People became your clients. I have some friends here in Vienna, Virginia, as a result of that summer's visa impasse. One is a dentist. I met him because I first met his brother, a medical researcher, who needed to travel. They're from Iran. And then the dentist needed to travel for the first brother's wedding. Then their father died at another wedding and I helped, their mother sent me pictures of a grandchild, and you begin to develop a relationship with people. So it's really kind of incredible how doing one's job can lead to lifelong friendships.

And then we had a problem with the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), which morphed into this Department of Homeland Security (DHS). As you probably know, people who have had a problem in their past, it could have been a very small crime, sometimes you have to get a waiver for the applicant. The visa is issued after consideration of the infraction, and it's issued with a notation that's called a waiver. Well, at one time the INS did these waivers. They came through very quickly. You could even call and get a waiver on the phone if it was an emergency.

Well, in the reorganization that created DHS, it somehow ended up that nobody was assigned to process the waivers for Canadian permanent residents. So, people who had been getting waivers to travel regularly, all of a sudden now that they needed a visa, there was no office doing it and it wasn't even clear where the Canadian citizens were going to be processed, because before they had always been processed at the airport. This situation became a nightmare for citizens and permanent residents of Canada—one of our closest allies.

So all of a sudden you're advocating for people with a criminal history. But, these people included the guy who smoked pot in college and was now, at 45, a CEO of a company, and travel was clearly in everyone's best interest.

Q: Or even somebody who had overstayed their visa in the past or something like that.

GERSON: Exactly. I had conundrums. I have a guy that I still am in touch with, a Canadian citizen, he'd been traveling for years, no problem. And then at one point he drove to the border to ask about an old arrest, because somebody told him if you have an old arrest you really should ask if it affected your travel. He'd been in a traffic accident in which a person had died. And unfortunately the statute under which the courts convicted him was one that involved moral turpitude, not the other one that didn't involve moral turpitude. And this guy, who represented four or five American companies, all of a sudden couldn't travel to the States to do his business, to sell American exports in the Quebec area, and nobody would help him. It was a nightmare. It took me easily a year to get him sorted out and get a waiver. Meanwhile, a couple of companies got other representatives, but now he's okay.

Some of our rules are so obscure. Another case involved a person who passed through the United States with a visa in order to request asylum in Canada. Canada admitted her as an asylee, but because she was not eventually granted asylum in Canada, the whole year or two that she spent in Canada waiting for her asylum hearing counted as if she had been illegally in the States. So when I met her, she was married to a Canadian citizen, but she couldn't travel with him, because technically she had an infraction, as if she had overstayed a year in the States, when she'd only been in the States three days.

How do you work through these things? They are so counterintuitive, so illogical. You can't give this to brand new junior officers to sort out by themselves. This didn't even make sense to me. You're liaising with people at the port of entry. You're trying to work through all of these almost insurmountable problems, and I hadn't been doing consular work for the previous eight years.

Sometimes I would send a "Help me" email. Luckily I had two contacts: Jim Pritchett in the office that did the security advisory opinions and Kevin Aiston, who's now moved on to a private law firm, who did the non-security advisory opinions. I emailed or called those guys practically every other day when I first arrived in Ottawa, and often their answer would be, "That came out in a cable in 1999." Well, in 1999 I wasn't doing consular work. For eight years I'd missed all of the intervening legislation and

procedures, so I was constantly running to catch up and make sure that I was on the right track so that I could guide the staff and help travelers.

Meanwhile, Toronto was so overburdened, they were so backed up with their interviews and Montreal too at one point that people came to Ottawa because we had some excess capacity. So we were not only doing our own workload, but our workload was sky rocketing with people from these other two districts that you couldn't really turn away. A lot of times these were truck drivers who needed to get an appointment so that they could continue working. That work was important for the U.S. as well.

You'd get things like documentary film makers. We had a big disconnect with immigration at the border on this category of traveler. These are Canadians who don't need visas. In theory they can get processed at the border, but immigration was turning away a lot of people because their interpretation of the regulations maintained, "Well, that film work should be done by an American" and questioned what constitutes the film maker and what constitutes his crew. I'd get involved in that, trying to make sure we were working off the same rules. We knew what the Foreign Affairs Manual said, but try to get that clarified and then get State and DHS to issue a joint directive as to how we were to deal with these people at the border. Not easy!

It was just one thing after another. We had so much work that I was interviewing full time. For the first two years I just interviewed on the line every morning, just like anyone else. We had to. Then finally, in the third year, I got a deputy. For years they'd been talking about getting a deputy who could run the day-to-day operation at Ottawa so that the minister counselor could travel more and I did travel as much as feasible to oversee the other consulates. I seemed to be in Toronto constantly.

But then maybe six to eight months before I was leaving the country, we had a final crisis with our panel physicians. These are the physicians who do the physical examinations for future immigrants, but also if you had somebody that you want to refer for a medical exam because they appear to have a mental problem or even immigration at the border would refer somebody for evaluation because they were carrying a lot of anti-depressants, they wanted to make sure what their mental state was, they would also be referred to the panel physicians. All of a sudden the panel physicians, who were all insured by a coop, almost like a union, that union decided they would no longer insure people who were providing care for people going to the United States or for people requiring completion of U.S. forms, because of liability and malpractice issues.

Well, what did this mean? This threatened our entire operation, and the coop wouldn't talk to the embassy except through the foreign ministry. This was called to my attention by one of our panel physicians. We were going to lose our ability to process immigrants. I worked nonstop on that, and it was maybe a couple of weeks before I left post at the end of my tour that we reached some solution. How could I leave that issue for my successor? You should have seen the size of the files. Finally the Department, L, agreed that they would take off all of our letterheads and any indicators that our forms were U.S. Government forms and the insurer accepted that, because they felt that that, plus some of

the other disclaimers that people signed, would be pretty good protection.

We had never had a lawsuit in all the years that we had been processing immigrants to the U.S. Never! But you can't fight city hall, in this case the Canadian insurers, and we had to find a workaround fast. It was a Catch 22 situation.

Q: A nice compromise diplomatic solution, made you feel you were negotiating resolutions back in Geneva again?

GERSON: Absolutely, but it worked better. We actually found a resolution, and L was very helpful. I promised those two lawyers I'd take them out for lunch, but I never did unfortunately. You would never think that a consular issue would be that complex.

Q: And ordinary Canadians were still not required to get visas?

GERSON: Correct. We would come into contact with them when they would have a problem at the border, and that was often with their waivers or cases like these documentary film makers.

Q: Did they even require passports?

GERSON: No, only evidence of citizenship, which, in many cases, was a credit card. It was really ridiculous. I'd have people come in, they had been pick pocketed in the ByWard Market in Ottawa, which was a very low crime place, but they'd be sitting in an outdoor cafe and leave their purse over the back of their chair and somebody would take it. "We've lost our identification! How are we going to get home?" I'd ask, "What did you lose?" "My credit card." Often these people were from right over the border. You'd call the border and say "Mrs. Gray in a gray sedan, with her husband, who was not robbed, is coming." "Oh, yeah, she's been shopping up there again?" They'd know the person, practically. We were very able, with the help of the U.S. immigration officials, to help these people. Now of course we've moved towards a requirement for everybody to have a passport to cross the border in either direction.

Another issue we spent a lot of time on was wait times at the border. Even though that was not my problem as the consul, we got all the complaints about the border crossings. Every time somebody was stopped at an airport, mistreated at an airport, had a problem at a border crossing, who are they going to write to? They write to the embassy or the consulate that's in that area.

Now I believe, just before I left, there were instructions about immigration or customs complaints, that if there were any complaints the public was supposed to send their correspondence to a specific DHS office. People would do that and then they'd never get an answer, so the embassy ended up with the letter anyway.

So you can't get away from the issue of border crossing times. You can't do it. Mexico, it's a huge issue, but in Canada it is as well. And who do they ask? They ask the embassy,

or they write something about it in the paper and the embassy gets a follow-on query.

I don't know how it's going to work when everybody has to show a passport. Maybe it'll be just as quick.

Q: Maybe quicker, who knows? I didn't realize that there had been a problem with wait times at the border, even.

GERSON: Especially when the U.S. goes to a Code Orange or a Code Red. Code Red, the border could be closed, depends on what the Code Red is for. But even Code Orange requires a higher level of scrutiny. All of a sudden you can't use the restrooms at the border, they're closed.

If the trucks are slowed down you can get huge lineups of trucks. Some of those trucks have to make several trips a day in order to make it worthwhile to deliver to factories in Detroit, and if you have to wait an hour to cross the border each time then there's an impact on everybody.

I did get involved in a border issue in Quebec, actually, where a Canadian citizen was arrested by the Border Patrol when he went to fill his car up with gas, because the border goes right through many of the towns. I had to go out with the consul general from Quebec to speak to a group of citizens down in this area, where the border crossings in some of these towns are very small. They're effectively what are called "wood ports," where the logging trucks come through and so the crossings may close officially at the end of the work day at 6:00. Well, in theory the border is then closed. If you were to cross any other place you were supposed to call the wood port and tell them "I'm crossing on Main Street." But if the wood port is closed, who are you going to call to say you're going to the library? Who are you going to call to say you're going to church?

Q: There's no fence?

GERSON: There's no fence.

Q: It's just an open town?

GERSON: In fact, the library, there was a big laugh because you could only go into non-fiction when the border was closed, because fiction was in the United States. There were houses where the kitchen was in the other country.

This guy that crossed, he had a rifle or shotgun, but, again, these are areas where people hunt all the time. There are snowmobile and ATV trails that cross from one country to the other, big private terrains where people pay money to go ATVing. Well, there's not a border guard on those trails.

Q: So you got him out of jail, I trust?

GERSON: Well, he was released before I got involved. What we had to do involved making it possible for him to go back to the U.S. for trial. He was actually rearrested when he went back in for a hearing. There was quite a lot of publicity at the time, and it called attention to the border issue.

In fact, at one point there was a program where people from certain countries had to register when they entered the United States and then they had to deregister when they left. When you went in to the U.S. you could enter anywhere, but when you left you had to deregister at certain places, because there was an actual check out process.

Well, they announced all the places along the Canadian border where you could deregister. Point Roberts, in Washington state, is a perfect example of the dilemma. Point Roberts is an enclave, part of the United States, but it can only be entered and left via Canada, it is a little peninsula. So, people who had to register when they entered there couldn't deregister on leaving because Point Rogers was not an authorized deregistry point. They could never have left. They would have had to swim back to the U.S. illegally.

This is what happens when you try to implement something without a good understanding of …

Q: Local conditions. How about the Alaskan border? Anything special up there?

GERSON: There was a place where people hiked a famous trail that crossed from Canada into Alaska. The trail was well known, a place where people went as organized groups or as individuals, and there were guides. The same problem--you couldn't reenter Canada on the trail because you could cross into the U.S. but not out of it since there was no deregistry point. We had this Syrian that left and couldn't come home again, Canadian resident but Syrian nationality. He went for a day-long hike and he was stranded in Alaska in the middle of nowhere. I remember that was a big thing and the tourist industry was somewhat concerned, not that there were tons of hikers, but still.

Of the two roads on the Alaskan main trucking routes, only one of them was listed as an acceptable deregistry point. We got the other one added to the deregister list and Point Roberts too.

We called to DHS's attention some of the most egregious oversights, and there was a second list issued shortly thereafter that resolved a lot of these problems. But not for all of these little communities that straddled the border.

And you've got the other problem, you've got Indians, some of the tribes, especially the Six Nations of the Iroquois, or the Haudenosaunee, they had never signed a treaty with the U.S. or Canada. As far as they're concerned, they are not citizens of either country, they are Haudenosaunee. They have their own passports. They have consulted with U.S. officials about machine readability and everything. Okay, anybody that's worked in these areas knows that they live in one or the other country geographically, but they're caught

between a rock and a hard place. They've never had to show anything but their native status cards to cross the border before.

Q: Did that change?

GERSON: I don't know exactly how that changed, because there's going to be a travel document requirement for the land border, but it hasn't yet come into implementation. It may be that there'll be other documentation that will be acceptable and maybe their native status cards will still be acceptable.

The other thing is, the Amish don't have their photos taken, and there are a lot of Amish in the Ontario region close to Toronto that cross the border regularly because the farms are on both sides of the border. I have been told by one of my former vice consuls, who now works in Toronto, that actually some Amish people have come and had passports issued. But these are people that have for years crossed the border with no problem to visit or work in other parts of their communities.

Nobody ever thinks about these cases.

Q: It's always been such a nice touch that we have the so-called longest border undefended in the world and people could just go back and forth freely was a nice thing to have. It's sad to see it go.

GERSON: We always used to say, too, that a significant percentage of all Canadians, in fact, probably have a claim to U.S. citizenship. I've just dealt with a case that's very interesting. I started dealing with it when I was assigned to Ottawa and stayed in touch with the gentleman after I left. He has traced his family back generations. I think it was his great-great-great-grandmother that was Native American. He can show through census data that she migrated across the border an entire tribe migrated across the border from the U.S. to Canada and then he can trace down that line all of the subsequent sons, that all--the great-grandfather, the grandfather and the father--all were born in Canada but all worked in the States and lived there for some period of time and therefore, according to U.S. citizenship law, the line of U.S. citizenship has been maintained, five parents removed.

His mother was an American citizen, but she has not resided in the U.S. prior to his birth so he had to trace citizenship through his father's side as well to prove that he had two American citizen parents—and that he too was born American. This man never gave up, and he was finally found to be an American citizen. For him it was just an emotional thing that he wanted, not that he was going to rush off and live in Arizona. For him, this was just a question of principle. He knew he was a citizen, he'd always known he was a citizen, but he couldn't prove it to anybody. I'm sure there are many people like that.

Q: That's where consular work really takes foreign policy to an individual basis like nothing else does.

Generally, of course, Canadian relations with the United States would have been very good, I trust?

GERSON: Relations were very good. The Canadians are wonderful. I was never asked, during the initial two years or so that I was there, to be the acting DCM while the DCM was gone. All the other section chiefs were men. It never bothered me. I was so busy, I really did not want to leave my office and go up and sit in the front office. The other people were already located on the fourth floor.

But one of my colleagues called the situation and the perception to the attention of the ambassador or the DCM, "Why is it that Leslie is never asked to be acting DCM?" because in fact I was the most senior officer at post, even more senior in rank than the DCM. The DCM didn't realize people had picked up on the optic. I never thought it had anything to do with my being a woman or a consular officer or anything. He said to me, "You're so bogged down with work." I said, "I really have no overwhelming desire to be acting DCM."

At any rate, he decided that I should be the chargé during a particular period when the ambassador and he were both going to be gone. Well, the U.S. invaded Iraq that day. I was not dressed to be called into the foreign minister's office, but the British ambassador and I were called to the foreign ministry for a bit of a protest: "What do we think we're doing and why didn't Canada know in advance?" So we had occasional days when the political relationships weren't that great. But always individuals were very cordial and very helpful.

Q: The Canadians were not part of the "coalition of the willing?"

GERSON: No, and they were making their formal protest. It was cordial and everything. So I had to rush back and work late to prepare the reporting cable.

Then that night, when I was finally ready to leave, I think it was maybe 9:00 or 10:00 p.m., I was told I couldn't leave because the bomb squad was outside and they had a suspicious package out there and a robot was trying to disarm it. I said, "I have not eaten, I am tired." They said, "You can leave" by this back door "but your car can't go." Ottawa is not exactly a place that has a lot of public transport, and I lived on the outskirts. I said, "I can't get out there without taking my car out." Finally the little robot that was trying to disarm this package had fallen over, and it was wiggling in the street, and nobody wanted to approach it. It turned out that somebody had just discarded a used briefcase out there.

That was an interesting day. I told the ambassador and the DCM, "Would you not make me chargé any more if this is what's going to happen every time that I'm in charge?"

Q: And was the embassy at that time still in that interesting old building?

GERSON: No, no. We were in a brand new building, right opposite parliament on the one side and the ByWard Market on the other side, so a very nice location, very nice,

brand new building.

Q: And bureaucratically, was Canada at this time part of the European bureau?

GERSON: No, it had become part of WHA by then.

Q: And did that have any practical effect on you in any way?

GERSON: Budget wise, very severe, because Canada had always been the poor relative in the EUR bureau previously, because it certainly was not in the mainstream of what most of EUR's issues were, and Canada wasn't allocated a lot of money. But EUR stripped the Canadian posts of a lot of money when they knew they were going to lose Canada to WHA. When Canada came to WHA it was already bone dry, and of course it's not WHA's main focus either. So, WHA never really thought to beef its budget up. And then when cuts were coming and they were cutting everybody by certain percentages Canada just didn't have anything to give, but nobody really focused on that. So we were always being asked to give more and more out of our budget.

Now, for me that was never a problem, because by then CA was supporting us with machine readable visa funds, so consular didn't suffer too much. But I heard a lot of complaints, particularly when I was working with the consulates, where meager representational funds needed to dribble down to the consulates, or travel funds were scarce. It was just always very tight. The ambassador traveled frequently and so I think there was not a lot left for other operational travel.

Q: From your perspective, what would make more sense, Europe or Western Hemisphere?

GERSON: Oh, I think WHA makes sense, but Canadian issues needed to grow into prominence within the bureau.

Q: And a comfortable place to live? Someplace you could get home easily and …

GERSON: Absolutely. A traffic jam in Ottawa was 15 cars waiting for the light to turn green.

Okay, it does snow for most of the year. The first year I was a little depressed, because I was constantly sliding all over the icy roads with my car. I hadn't gotten snow tires. It can be pretty gray from January 'til March. But by the second year, with my snow tires and knowing what I was in for, I was fine.

It's not a place where there's a lot of representation either, not a lot of obligatory entertaining. I was no longer working 16 hours a day, only maybe 12 sometimes. There was very little official entertainment that I had to attend. I'm a consular officer, I'm not the DCM anymore. So after quite a few years of having 24 hours a day planned for me I had time to read a lot, I went to movies, I actually went shopping, I did things around the

house, I swam in the summer, I had friends. It was great.

Q: So that was 2001 to 2004, so, a regular three year assignment?

GERSON: Correct, and then the issue was that I thought I only had two years left in the Service by my calculations, although I soon learned I actually had three. And I came back to DC. I'd always had my mind on OIG, the Office of Inspector General. I thought, I've done a lot of good things in my career, and, well, where would I want to go, if I don't want to be an ambassador, and I certainly didn't want to work on the Seventh Floor again. Plus, I'd lost all of the visibility that I had as a DCM and a PDAS. I would have had to reconstruct that and play on that for high visibility jobs and that's just not my thing.

So I had looked at OIG before and I thought I'd really like to do that type of work. It kind of pulls everything together. So I went to OIG as a consular inspector.

Q: In the summer of 2004?

GERSON: Correct, started in September, that's when they have the training course and I was prepared to go a really difficult place, see the places that I'd never seen before, sub-Saharan Africa, deepest, darkest Asia, and all of this. And my first inspection was Paris.

Q: Today is November 30, 2007. I'm continuing my interview with Leslie Gerson. Can you describe what working in OIG was like?

GERSON: Of course when I actually started to work in OIG I realized that everyone there from the Foreign Service is either an FS-01 or a Senior Foreign Service officer. And then of course there's a cadre of Civil Service, usually in the management and the IT and the security areas, who are more or less professional inspectors or have come from OIGs in other agencies.

It's a very different group. It's not a group where you necessarily find all of your colleagues that you've served with around the world. There may be one or two that you knew before, but largely the group is pulled from all different regions and all different specialties. Every team that is formed to inspect an embassy or a domestic bureau includes persons from different areas of expertise. So you will have a team that includes some management people, some security people, some IT people, a consular person or two, depending on the size, as well as pol/econ, public diplomacy, and then the team leader who covers leadership issues. Usually the teams are led by a former ambassador. So it's a team that's very heterogeneous and quite interesting.

Q: And this sounds like they're big teams. What, eight or ten people on the team?

GERSON: Well, that depends on the size of the place you're going to inspect and the complexity. So, for example, I'm going to go to Lagos in the winter, as a retired annuitant. This will be my first job in retired status. Well, management, we know from

some of our surveying, requires some attention. So there'll be three management people on the team. Pol/econ will have one person. Public diplomacy will have one person. I will be the sole consular inspector. Actually, they offered me a second consular person but I thought I could do it alone.

But when you're inspecting a post with a constituent post or more than one constituent post, it's frankly a little easier to do it all yourself and pull together a unified product than to have two or three people writing bits and pieces and then you find that your style and your approach is different from theirs. Then I, as the senior person, would have to re-edit it all anyway.

So the way that a team is formed depends on an embassy's or bureau's size and what you're likely to find. In Russia, for example, we had to inspect three constituent posts from one end of the continent to the other, practically (two continents, actually). That's how vast the country is, plus a huge embassy, and we had little sub-teams that went out to the consulates. So you might have to have a few more people in order to do that, but then some of the people might go home earlier.

And if you're inspecting a small place you might go to two or three countries in sequence and the team would be smaller. For example, many places don't have very significant consular work. When I went to Cambodia, for example, I certainly didn't need more than two weeks even though the consular work was complex, the section had had some problems, and they was getting the immigrant visa function back after a several year hiatus. I was busy buy not overworked.

Whereas, I followed Cambodia with Manila, which is one of the largest consular sections in the world. So in Manila I was joined by an additional person to help with the consular inspection. A small section and a huge section on the same trip…one has to be flexible in the team makeup.

So it requires a little bit of strategy.

Q: Now someplace where the consular function is less busy, like Cambodia and the team might go out for, say, a month and you're done in two weeks, do you just finish up in two weeks and hang around?

GERSON: In that case, Cambodia was followed by the Philippines, so I obviously couldn't go anywhere. But sometimes a consular inspector will have ancillary responsibilities. For example, I did some human rights and refugee inspecting in Cambodia, something I'm familiar with from my former life. So I took that from the pol/econ inspector, who was also doubling up and covering public diplomacy. So I helped someone else out. I did EEO (equal employment), for example, as well. Some functions can be covered by another inspector even though it's not their primary area of expertise. So there's kind of a good subdivision.

Q: Tell me how the office is set up. Now, when you get this kind of assignment do you

assume you're going to be on the road all the time or are there also Washington functions?

GERSON: There are. We inspect all the bureaus as well, usually divided up into offices for the larger bureaus. In other words, you couldn't do CA in a six-week inspection or DS in a six-week inspection. But it's kind of assumed that you will travel much of the time. You have to be prepared to be out on the road all the time. There are some Civil Service employees who don't do the overseas inspections very frequently because of their areas of expertise. So there are some people that tend to work primarily on domestic inspections.

But most of the Foreign Service officers who are serving in OIG as a regular tour should expect to be overseas most of the time, budget permitting. When you have a very severe budget climate, you end up redirecting and doing more things domestically.

So my first inspection, much to my chagrin, because of course I imagined I would go to Africa, you may recall I had always wanted to go to Africa in my career and I thought, "Oh, great, there's some place in Africa on this inspection." So they called me in and said I'm going to Paris.

Q: Most people wouldn't object.

GERSON: Well, I didn't object, but I just couldn't believe it. How could I just continue to be kept away from Africa?

But my first inspection was Paris and that was quite complex, because you have a very large embassy, but you also have these five APPs, American Presence Posts. France spearheaded the APP program under a former ambassador who felt we needed to have more presence out in the countryside. And we didn't know what we were going to find there. It was expected back here in Washington that we would do some sort of an evaluation of whether this whole APP concept was working, because other bureaus in other regions were thinking of starting APPs. So, what we thought and said about the success of the program in France was important.

Q: This sounds like Condi Rice's Transformational Diplomacy, get one person in lots of places.

GERSON: A little bit. This was actually Felix Rohatyn, who felt that we could influence better by having a fluent French speaker doing public diplomacy, American citizen services and commercial promotion in some of the places where in the olden days we had consulates, but some new places, too. So there was Bordeaux, which used to be a consulate; Lyon, which used to be a consulate; Lille, in the north where we also used to have a consulate, closed in the '60s; and Rennes in the west.

Q: Strasbourg?

GERSON: Strasbourg is very different. Strasbourg is a mission to an international organization, to the European Parliament.

Q: But isn't it a consulate, as well?

GERSON: It is, as well, but it's not an APP. It has another reason for being. Marseilles is a full-fledged consulate. Nice is a consular agency. Toulouse is the other APP.

So we had teams moving all around in little bits and pieces.

Q: That's quite a lot. Do we still have all that in France?

GERSON: Yes. But each of these APPs has only one American, supported by one to two FSNs, depending on the size of the place. I think actually Bordeaux and Lyon had more. I think Lyon had four FSNs. They were quite effective.

So that was my first inspection. It was amazing, because essentially half of us were on our first inspection, so it was a little bit the blind leading the blind, and you learn the hard way. You don't learn all the little tricks until you've finished with your first inspection.

And then after that I was sent to India, same team leader. You go from place to place.

Q: Before we start leaping from place to place, get back to Washington for a moment. You arrive and presumably they've planned the inspection schedule way in advance. How often are posts inspected?

GERSON: Once every five years in theory. That's what it's supposed to be, but it can slip to six, seven. Sometimes you find a place that has not been inspected for eight years. And in between there may be a bureau or a post that asks for an inspection because they have a specific problem.

But, yes, someone knew what the schedule for the year was going to be, and the embassies also knew. And the experienced inspectors put in their wish lists for where they might like to go.

Q: That did not go for the new arrivals like yourself?

GERSON: No, I was just told, "You're going to Paris." The first couple of cycles had already been planned out in theory by the office director, how that would work, who she was going to need, because they couldn't wait for us to arrive and learn the whole system.

When you arrive you have training for several days, because inspections follow a very specific protocol. You have to have certain criteria in order to make a recommendation. You have to have a cause, effect, a standard that you're trying to match. You can't just go in and say, "I think this embassy should rearrange its furniture." There has to be a reason, some failing that can be documented following certain standards called blue book

standards.

We have training on how to write our recommendations so that they can be complied with. It doesn't do any good to say, "The ambassador should be more friendly." How do you document compliance?

You learn that certain things are done better through counseling rather than in the recommendation format. Certain things are done by informal recommendations, where the post has immediately embraced your recommendation, and it doesn't require anyone other than the post to make the change. Sometimes they even start implementing an informal recommendation while you're still there. Third, there are the formal recommendations that require maybe additional funding or the post resists the change a little bit or it's going to require some adjustment of the system somehow. For those issues you write a formal recommendation and when you're finished, after the report is published, these recommendations go into a compliance process. There's another section of the Office of Inspector General that then follows up and engages in a dialogue with the post about: "Well, recommendation one. What have you done about it?" "Oh, well, we did that. This is what we did." "Okay, fine, that's closed. Recommendation two?" "Well, we're not too certain about your idea."

Sometimes it occurs that a post is still resolving a recommendation from an inspection, maybe just the year before the next inspection is going to take place, because some of them can be rather complex.

Q: And others, I suppose, they would just sort of dust off the report before the inspectors came out again?

GERSON: Well, it's expected that they would do that. In fact, we encourage an embassy to look at the previous report and make sure, because sometimes a post backslides. An ambassador and DCM team, a management officer, they all depart and a new team comes in and says, "Wouldn't this be a lot simpler?" And yet it was the very thing where the OIG had noted vulnerabilities three years earlier. It does happen. It also happens occasionally that a post <u>says</u> all the right things and in fact doesn't <u>do</u> the right things.

Sometimes if you feel that a post is really very reticent or has severe problems, the OIG will do a quick follow-on compliance review six to 12 months after the inspection. This is not done frequently, but it's done more often where there is a very serious leadership problem and where interpersonal, EEO or other leadership skills have been called into doubt. Either the incumbent has been left at the post with a commitment that he or she is going to change behavior, or the incumbent has been removed, which occasionally occurs. This hasn't occurred to anyone that I inspected, but there were certainly some cases that were still being talked about where that occurred just before I started, where a new embassy leadership team had come in to replace the former one, but you want to go and make sure that it has really positively affected the post.

So there are all sorts of methods. I just want to say that the inspections office is only one

of the offices at the OIG. There are also audit and investigations divisions. The investigations division looks at cases where there have been reports of waste, fraud or mismanagement that do not fall under DS. Those are individual cases. We consult with investigations before we go out on an inspection to make sure we're not going to walk into an investigation without being aware of it.

Audits often looks at things that are much more waste oriented, correct expenditures of moneys, programs. Sometimes a small audit team will accompany us. For example, when we went to Colombia we had an audit group with us counting U.S.-funded aircraft, because we pay a lot of money for aircraft and we need to make sure that they're being maintained properly and accounted for properly.

So those two divisions have a different focus, and our interaction is somewhat limited.

Q: Now, generally speaking, how do you find posts regard inspectors? With fear and trepidation?

GERSON: Well, a little bit, but usually they welcome you, at least that's what they say. And I think a lot depends on how you set the tone. The deputy team leader, and I have done that job on a couple of occasions, kind of sets the tone, with email correspondence with the DCM and then with whomever the point of contact is, to try to get the post ready, not only what you need in the way of logistics as far as hotels and meetings and so forth, but also giving them a hint as to how they can help you and "we're from Washington and we're coming to help you."

We have these welcome meetings when we first get to an embassy. There's sort of a standard initial schedule. You always meet with the chief of mission immediately, lay out the process, answer any questions, listen to what he or she has to say about what they would like you to look at, because often they want you to help them with a difficult section or a management problem, or a resource problem, a facilities problem, and we will always look at that issue carefully.

Then we always have an open town hall meeting with American direct hires and then with local hires, State Department employees, but others are also welcome to attend. We're only there to inspect State entities, although we do talk to the other agencies because we want to see how they interact with the State entities. But we're not inspecting them *per se*. So we have introductory meetings where we try to present ourselves in a humorous, human manner. We give the staff ways that they can contact us discretely, because sometimes people want to talk about things that they don't want their bosses to know about. We eat in the cafeteria, we try to attend any functions that they have that would be appropriate for us to attend. We have meetings with the junior officers, now called entry-level officers, and sometimes with the office management staff, sometimes with spouses.

I remember in Paris we spent a lot of time with the office management specialists because there'd been an incredible curtailment rate in that group, and we wanted to see

how could that be, that people would want to curtail from Paris for goodness sake, and was there something going on other than the attraction of extra money somewhere else.

Q: And was there?

GERSON: I was not the one who spearheaded that part of the inspection, but I think there was some disgruntlement in certain sections about how they were being treated, but others were responding to the call to go to Iraq, at the incredible amounts of money that service in Iraq involved.

That resurfaced again in Lima. When I was going out to Lima I was told there must be some problem in the consular section, because so many officers had curtailed. So I reached out to the four officers who had left post early. I looked for them at their onward assignments. I found all but one, who had actually reenlisted in the military, and they all loved their experience in Lima, felt that their consul general was excellent, but heeded the call to service in Iraq. All had formally been military and felt that they had something to offer. So it turned out to be that Washington had made a false assumption about the curtailments and had blamed that on leadership erroneously.

Q: Okay, well, maybe we can get back to Paris for a few minutes. You said you had this interesting situation the consulates and the APPs around the country. How did you find that? Was it a good model?

GERSON: It was. They were doing excellent work. I think there were specific reasons why they were successful, and I believe we wrote that in our report. I used a similar analysis in another case, where I did a special study on the Mexican border posts. If you're going to have a post like that, a small post, that is in fact going to be highly visible in its area and where the ambassador can't be there every minute, you need a person with outstanding language skills. What we meant there is 4/4 or above. And they had that in France. I think there was only one APP officer with less than a 4/4 but she was such an outgoing person, she was 3+/3+ and she was going to get to 4/4, and her personality compensated. You need to have an extremely independent worker, outgoing personality, not hesitant to reach out and engage, because there's no one doing it for you. You have to find the opportunities; you have to be highly visible. And they had really gotten the right people there in France. Now I don't know whether that's true today, but at the time we inspected, and it's always just a snapshot of when the post is inspected, they had really done a good job. These people were highly regarded in the areas where they were working and very effective.

Q: So, a good model, perhaps.

GERSON: If all those attributes are present.

Q: And I suppose there's a question of cost effectiveness, as well. Maybe in France you don't have to have quite the security infrastructure as you would for one-person posts in Pakistan or someplace like that.

GERSON: I remember in Bordeaux there was a police car parked outside that consulate every minute that it was open and yet it was a small, non-descript entrance. I believe it was in the chamber of commerce, beautiful spot. We probably didn't need that police presence, but the local government took security seriously and they had provided that security at no charge, I'm sure. So, yes, it's true. Different places have different requirements.

Q: And after Paris?

GERSON: After Paris my next inspection was India, same team leader, same deputy team leader. At two of the three consulates, Chennai and Mumbai, the consular sections are larger than that in Delhi. They're huge posts. Then Calcutta is much smaller on the consular side. I had a WAE, a longtime retired annuitant, with me and he covered Chennai and Calcutta, and I did Mumbai and Delhi and then we, of course, met in Delhi and hashed out all of our findings. Fascinating place, just fascinating.

Q: Had you been before?

GERSON: Never. The amazing thing about being an inspector is I've gotten to go places where I've always had an image of the country and work at a particular embassy that may be very wrong. There hasn't been a place that I have gone to as an inspector that I didn't wish that I'd had an opportunity to serve there, not one so far. Now Nigeria—my next inspection--may be an exception.

India was just a fascinating place. There was a political appointee ambassador, as there had been in Paris, of course. That's to be expected in Paris. The ambassador to India had been preceded by someone who had a lot of interpersonal and management problems and who had, I believe, been curtailed. But the incumbent ambassador we were inspecting, who I believe had been in banking, was just top notch, and his DCM was excellent as well, someone who used to work with me in the Ops Center. They just had a great team.

The problem is, when you have these massive consulates, not all of the consuls general were as strong as the team in Delhi. And of course there's always a feeling of disgruntlement. The consulates don't get the attention, the resources. They have to beg the embassy for money.

Mumbai was in an absolutely appalling building. The consular section used to flood in the monsoons, and they put up a little bridge to get from part A to part B, over the flooded floor. There were file cabinets everywhere. At the same time, there had been a new property identified. OBO had a new drawing. I don't think they've moved in yet, but I think it's imminent.

But that was a fascinating inspection and a fascinating place to be.

Q: How long does a typical inspection last?

GERSON: I think we were in India for about seven weeks, because of all the constituent posts. We write the draft report while we're on site. Your report is essentially left, in draft, before you leave. So, to pull together all of the information, decide how you're going to organize it, you often can't do that until you get the issues clear in your mind. Then to write it, we spend usually the last week writing and clearing the report before we hand it over and have the outbrief.

Q: Who do you clear it with?

GERSON: We clear it with our office in Washington. Again, not to have every detail on it cleared but to make sure that there's nothing huge that's been omitted, that we haven't made some statements in the executive direction that aren't supported. Our OIG leadership doesn't read every word. Sometimes these reports are 80 pages long. I believe the report from the team that just came back from Brazil, I was not on that inspection, was about 120 pages and was going to be edited down. Some of these are pretty long.

We start with the key judgments, where you pull out your key six to ten items. Then there's an executive direction part where you talk about the embassy's leadership. That's pretty carefully looked at by the office director and the deputy assistant secretary in charge of inspections, as well as your findings, your formal recommendations. Those are looked at to make sure that they're crafted properly. But additional editing will occur afterwards.

Q: You say you leave the draft at the embassy.

GERSON: That's right and you discuss it with the ambassador before you leave.

Q: And is the draft what you give to the ambassador before you leave?

GERSON: That's correct. You give it to them 24 hours before your outbrief and then you discuss it at the outbrief. It can either be with just the ambassador and the DCM, or if the ambassador wants to include the whole State Department country team that is okay too. If the report is very critical of the ambassador, sometimes only the ambassador and DCM are present.

Q: Although generally it gets circulated within the embassy, doesn't it, eventually?

GERSON: State officers only. Now if there's a recommendation that would require that certain FSNs change a procedure then obviously they will know about it, but as far as reading the whole unredacted report, it's a State document.

Q: Would an ordinary officer, say, in the consular section, or PD section, see the part that's critical of the ambassador as well?

GERSON: Not necessarily. When I would vet the report, when we'd vet it with sections

we were inspecting, we would vet what we'd written about that section. But eventually, frankly, the whole report is available at the country desk for anybody going out to post to see.

Q: As generally it should be. The idea is to get them to improve their performance.

GERSON: We try in the reports to be very factual. There are other documents that we prepare as well. Not only do we do an SBU (sensitive but unclassified) or unclassified report, but we also usually have a classified annex that has to do with security information, or if there happens to be information of a classified nature from any other section it appears in that document.

There are also performance evaluations for both the ambassador and the DCM. They're called IERs, Inspection Evaluation Reports. And we prepare IERs for any principal officer, if there are constituent posts. And then there's also the possibility of writing an IER on someone else if you need to correct an erroneous previous EER, Employee Evaluation Report.

For example, if I get somewhere and the consul general is horrible, this is just an example, and everybody's talking about how this person performs so poorly in very specific ways, I will ask to see their last EER. If their EER says that they walk on water and I can document that they are not even dog paddling in that water, I would write, in consultation with the team leader, a corrective IER, so that in their performance file there is an evaluation that reflects their performance accurately, as opposed to this water walker. From having been on promotion and performance boards, I can tell you that those IERs are looked at very, very favorably. It's sometimes one of the only honest things in someone's file.

Q: But now presumably the person upon whom you write this also gets to see it and comment upon it?

GERSON: Absolutely, just the same process. But since we're not in a relationship with that person where they have to work for you afterwards, the IERs are tactful but they're very honest and so they're highly regarded by others. But IER preparation can be difficult for the team leader, especially when the IER might be critical but is commenting on someone who's usually very successful, and very anxious to do an excellent job, to be viewed well by the bureau.

Sometimes the bureau has told you that a post is incredibly wonderful and everything is great, and you get out there and you're the person hearing everyone complain about someone and you're the person seeing the post's dysfunctionality. Not only do you have to be the one to tell the ambassador or the DCM that he or she is really not beloved and furthermore is doing some really egregious things, either mismanagement or interpersonal. Interpersonal weaknesses are the hardest to get at. What's worse, when you go back to the Department and tell bureau leadership what you've found, they are incredulous: "That can't be! That just can't be!"

I won't go into detail here, but sometimes you walk into a post and people are just waiting for you almost the moment your plane lands to tell you how unhappy they are and how miserable so and so is to work for and how insulting and dehumanized they make everyone feel and you're saying to yourself, "In Washington, when we were briefed they said nothing of this." You spend about a month preparing for each inspection, talking to all the end users, not only the country desk but several other agencies. They're not necessarily looking at how an individual has run roughshod over his or her staff in order to achieve the desired goal so they're taken aback with the OIG report.

Q: Do individuals react badly when they hear these kinds of things?

GERSON: Sometimes they're very shocked and don't realize, no one has ever told them, so they're in a way upset but appreciative. And then there are others who are defensive: "No! Well, they're all stupid!" Those are the harder ones. In sum, what you're getting at is an innate quality, which is hard. You still have to tell the person when they are not performing well as a leader, but the message is not always appreciated.

I remember one very interesting post. I wouldn't mind at all working there and for that ambassador. But, it was reported that that ambassador slept with work literally spread out on the bed. The person worked practically 24 hours a day. Extremely full of ideas, good ideas, high visibility, attention to that small post as a result of their efforts, but the staff was dying on the vine. The staff couldn't even go home to be with their families in order to support the ambassador's pace. The ambassador was unaware that not everybody was willing to sacrifice everything for a telegram.

Of course there's this Gen Y issue. The Gen Ys are extremely different from older officers and they have to be managed and challenged differently. In fact, one of our ambassadors, a team leader, spends a great deal of time talking with the ambassadors about managing Gen Ys, because Gen Ys will just up and quit. They are, "My eight hours are over and I'm going to do this and I don't need this" and it's a very different focus from the older ambassador who comes from a different era.

It's quite interesting. I've learned a lot. It's a real good culmination of a career.

Q: I'll bet it is and good for the Service, too, for you go out to do this type of thing after you've accumulated so many different kinds of experience.

GERSON: So, after India I led an inspection of CA/EX, that's the executive office of the Bureau of Consular Affairs. Normally when we're overseas the team leader is an ambassador or former ambassador, because you're criticizing or commenting on post leadership. In order to be credible to them, they're expecting to be evaluated by an ambassador. But when you're doing an office in Washington, with an office director, it was fine for me to be leading that team.

That was interesting. It was, of course, an office in which I had previously worked, one of the largest bureaus in the State Department, with a huge budget. I think there were about six of us that worked on the CA/EX inspection.

Then, summers we rarely inspect, because we have to have some time to take vacation and get training, plus it's turnover time for most embassy staffs. The only time inspectors can really take vacation is the Christmas-New Year week, because otherwise you're always either preparing for an inspection, on an inspection, or wrapping up an inspection. When you're done you have to make sure all your work papers, all your documentation, is in order and then you start preparing for the next one.

Over the following year I did Colombia and Peru, Argentina and Chile, Russia, Cambodia, the Philippines and the Caucasus, the three embassies in the Caucasus. The next summer I did a special, last minute, very quick study of non-consular staffing of the posts along the Mexican border. Summer is such a wonderful time to be in the Sonora Desert! We were in Russia when it was snowing. Sometimes the timing of inspections was not properly thought out! We had some money, the WHA bureau had asked us to look at some of their problems on the border, and so I led that team actually. And then I also led three small office inspections in the Department: FLO, which is the Family Liaison Office; Casualty Assistance, which is an office of three people that deals with the families of deceased Foreign Service and State Department employees; and then the EEO office, which we call OCR, Office of Civil Rights.

That was quite a challenging inspection, and the team composition was also challenging for those three offices. Domestic inspections are very different. They don't follow the same format of executive direction, political section, economic section, public affairs, consular. You have to craft something thematic that makes sense for these domestic inspections, but there's no model. Each office is different.

I don't like the domestic inspections as well. You don't have that sense of camaraderie among the inspectors. You come in from home every day. You go home every day. There's none of that bonding with your team that you might do when you're overseas. And of course on the weekends you get to do your grocery shopping, you don't get to see the Taj Mahal. But intellectually they were interesting.

Q: So, like four or five every year, it sounds like. A pretty heavy load.

GERSON: Colombia and Peru were together. Normally you've got three quarters of the year when you're inspecting: the fall quarter, the winter quarter and the spring quarter. And then if by chance you happen to have something in the summer like I did with the Mexican border study, that year, from May 1st until the following June, I was never home more than a week at a time, except for Christmas.

Q: Of course you kept your house open and so forth but you were just on the road all the time?

GERSON: That's right. You're constantly gone. I'd have to have a friend come in and pay my bills. You can pay online, but sometimes it's not that easy.

Q: Only if you're a modern girl.

GERSON: Medical bills that come in, you can't pay those on line. You don't even know what they are. Somebody has to be there, looking and seeing if there's something catastrophic going on. So, luckily I have a friend who comes in and does that. Of course I have my housekeeper, who looks after my dog. You come home and the dog goes, "Who are you?" You just have time to get through the stacks of mail and off you go again. They love me at the dry cleaner when I come in: "Four hundred items again!"

Q: Do any of the inspections particularly stick in your mind as unusual or noteworthy?

GERSON: They were all great. There's not a place that I wouldn't love to go. We had leadership issues in a number of them, but I don't feel that I should talk about that.

At the beginning, maybe about a month before you go, the posts are asked to have everybody complete a questionnaire, mainly on the services and how happy they are at post. There are 50 items that they rate, from the ambassador and morale down to the cafeteria, which needless to say often comes in quite low. And it's very interesting to see this survey, you see this before you even get to post. Normally the ambassador and DCM, if it's a good post, should fall somewhere in the top third of the rated items. They are very rarely first, because the Marines almost always come in first. There's always going to be somebody who has a problem with the ambassador or DCM. The cafeteria is often ranked in the last three. Housing, that depends very much, a very iffy thing. But you get a good picture of the post through those questionnaires.

And staff have an opportunity to provide comments. If nobody provides comments, you've probably got a pretty happy post. When you start getting pages and pages of comments about the travel section or morale, you're pretty ready for a tricky inspection. You have other questionnaires that you actually review while at post that grade the ambassador and the DCM and the supervisors, but you don't see those until you get to post.

Sometimes you go to a post and the ambassador and the DCM are quite poorly rated. In one case in particular, I recall the DCM was third from the bottom, only above the non-existent recreation center. So then you know you've also got a problem. And the ambassador was about halfway down on the 50-item list. When we started to read the comments, we realized the ambassador's low ranking was because she wasn't doing anything about the DCM. So then you know that you've got a situation, does the ambassador know that the DCM is failing and isn't doing anything about it, or does the ambassador not know that the DCM is failing, which is a whole different problem. But you have a little bit of time to figure these things out in advance.

But in general it's amazing what some of these posts do with stretched resources and

some of the talented people that you have all over the world.

Q: Did you find any pattern of differences between career and political appointee ambassadors in how the posts ran?

GERSON: Not too much. Not in those that I inspected.

Q: You obviously liked it, since you've signed up for more.

GERSON: I actually thought I was supposed to leave the Service after two years. I thought that I had to retire after two years in OIG. But while I was on the India inspection somebody asked me what my date of promotion was and I said 1992. This was to the Senior Foreign Service. They said, "Look, you need to know the day of your promotion." I said, "Well, why? What is it about 1992 that you don't understand?" He said, "Because if it was in fiscal year 1993 you actually get another year." So I went back and asked my CDO what was my date of promotion, and he said that year Congress delayed things, it was October 6, 1992. So I stayed on for a third year, which was great.

Now, as long as the office has money, they can rehire you as a retired annuitant. This last year they didn't recruit enough permanent consular inspectors. They would have liked to have another one or possibly two. So they're happy to have me, which is great.

Q: And do you think you're going to be having an almost fulltime career as it continues?

GERSON: Well, you can only work as a WAE up to 1040 hours, which is six months. Nigeria is going to be a seven-week inspection.

Q: You finally get to Africa.

GERSON: I'm not sure that Nigeria is where I would have chosen, but a couple of weeks of preparation and a week or so concluding and I'll have 400 hours already. You don't have to work every hour, so in other words if I have meetings only four hours a day during the preparatory phase and there's nothing else for me to do, I can go home, I can save my hours a little bit. And they're talking about the spring, perhaps, doing Dublin, which would be a short inspection, as the sole consular officer. That would maybe be three, four weeks, at most, probably three. So that would be it for the year and we'd start again next winter.

Q: Anything we've left out that we should talk about?

GERSON: Not that I can think of.

Q: Well, you've had a fascinating career and life.

GERSON: I guess the one thing I want to say, I don't know if it's important for an oral history, but as you know, during my tour in Haiti, I met and married my husband, who

was a very famous Haitian actor, radio personality, satirist, and while I was inspecting the embassy in Tbilisi, Georgia, this last spring he was kidnapped and killed in Haiti.

Many of us meet and marry foreigners while we're overseas and we become very involved in the life of their countries. We were very unusual in that he never left his country to follow me and I never left my job to live with him. We commuted for all of that time. For 26 years, we commuted.

You always ask yourself, to what extent did our policy in a country like Haiti actually lead to his death? You can't dwell on this, but when you think of the history of that country and our interventions or our lack of intervention at certain times and the destabilization that's occurred there as a result of political change that we may or may not have played a role in, you can't help but wonder.

He lost a great deal of faith in the U.S. over the years, although he did become friendly with some of the ambassadors there, particularly Jim Foley, whom he respected a great deal.

At any rate, what I found through my Foreign Service career I also lost in a way through my Foreign Service career.

Q: Well, he was a great guy and we're all sorry to hear about it, of course.

GERSON: So, anyway, I think that we've reached the end.

Q: Well, I think we have. I think this is a valuable contribution to the collection and thank you for participating.

GERSON: Thank you, Peter.

End of interview