

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

GERARD M. GERT

Interviewed by: G. Lewis Schmidt
Initial interview date: December 30, 1988
Copyright 1998 ADST

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Gerry Gert: Bio Sketch

OMGUS Was the Entrée into Public Affairs Work

Trying Out a New Idea: The Citizen Participation Team

Transfer to Berlin: Radio in the American Sector (RIAS)
Gert's Special Experience for RIAS during East Berlin Uprising of June, 1953

1960: Gert Goes to Belgrade as Information Officer

Tito Sees the USIS Film on John Glenn

Difficulties of Working on Tito's Closely Controlled Society

1962: Gert Goes to Vietiane, Laos, as PAO

DCM in Laos Tried to "Torpedo" Gert

The Limits on What USIS Could D in Laos

A Year at National War College (1965-1966), then a Volunteer Assignee to Vietnam –
PsyOps

Description of Organization and Operator in PsyOps

The Tet Offensive

Return to Berlin – RIAS: 1968

Gert Directed to Reduce RIAS Staff and Increase German Government Funding of RIAS

But the Cutdown and Funding Transfer Cost USIA Substantial Control of RIAS

Political Difficulties in Changing RIAS Head

The Related but Differing Roles of RIAS and Radio Liberty/ Radio Free Europe

Did SPD Control of German Government Result in Softening RIAS's Tough Broadcasting to East Germany?

Evaluation as to Effectiveness of RIAS

A Brief Return for Final Comments about USIA (JUSPAO) Efforts in Vietnam

INTERVIEW

Q: Gerry, I will start off by asking you to give a little biographic background, where you came from, what you did, and what finally brought you into what became USIA, the gradations of that, and then a discussion of the various programs with which you were associated either as an operating member or as a director. Why don't you start with your bio.

Gerry Gert: Bio Sketch

GERT: I was born on February 4, 1920, in the Free City of Danzig. I lived there until 1927, and my parents and I moved to a place called Stettin or Szczecin, which is in Pomerania. Then we lived in Berlin for two years, and in 1937 I decided I had had enough of Mr. Hitler, and I took off by myself and went to the United States.

I attended college in America going to Lebanon Valley College in Pennsylvania. In 1942, I got a BS from NYU in New York, did some graduate work at the New School for Social Research. Later on in 1942, I thought I'd better join the army. I was in the Army until '46, in February. I was hired the next day by the organization that was then responsible for running Germany, OMGUS, Office of Military Government US

OMGUS Was The Entree Into Public Affairs Work

Because of my experience in intelligence in the Army days, I was in De-Nazification, which, of course, was fascinating. I was in De-Nazification of OMGUS til '47. Then I joined an outfit called Political Parties Branch, where we licensed the first political parties in Germany. Since my boss was about to license some guy who looked to me like a Nazi, I got mad, I quit. I went across the hall, where I joined something called Democratization. That was really the beginning of Public Affairs. I stayed with that outfit in different

incarnations. They changed names and labels, but primarily we conducted the first exchanges programs. I'm proud to say that the first political scientists, the first policemen, public servants, anything in the field of political science and government, these Germans were sent to the United States by my outfit. This went on until '49, when the State Department took over. It then was known as HICOG, High Commission Germany.

Trying Out A New Idea: The Citizen Participation Team

If I may stay for one minute with the exchanges program, because after all it intersects with USIA, we had a wonderful idea. A guy named John Brown Mason, who is still alive, lives in Fullerton, a guy named Dick Cooper, and I were in this outfit. We came up with an idea which I think was new. It was called Citizens Participation. Instead of sending individual Germans from different walks of life, we thought they might pick up some better ideas or some good ideas if they'd go as a team. So we picked a team of seven people, and we started out with the city of Krefeld. People from different walks of life--a laborer, a banker, a chemist, a high school teacher, somebody from city administration--were selected and they looked at their respective specialty. This was called the Citizen Participation Team.

Q: This raises two questions in my mind. Was this done solely under the auspices of the Army? There was in State at that time a unit that ultimately became USIA. At that time it was called Information and Education.

GERT: IIE or some such thing.

Q: It became later IIA before it was USIA. I am wondering if these exchanges were handled at the stateside end by the Army, or were they handled by this predecessor of USIA?

GERT: It must have been the Army, as you say, because in the States we had contracted with organizations that took care of these people.

Q: Institute of International Education was one.

GERT: That was one. Phil Metger and Ernie Linde were guys in the United States who had set up organizations like the Governmental Affairs Institute that were prepared to sponsor and place participants in cities, make up the schedule, handle the travel and all that. So I think this was out of the Army hands.

Q: I think it was. I think it was handled by USIE at that time.

GERT: I believe so.

Q: Their charter was the Smith-Mundt Act of 1947. So it probably was handled stateside.

GERT: It was a very interesting project. If you go to Krefeld today, you'll find Philadelphia Strasse in memory of their experiences in the United States. To this day they have some

very fine ties. The Citizen Participation Team projects were, I guess, established in 12 locations in Germany. It was a very interesting project. Enough of that.

In 1953, of course, USIA came into business, and all of us in the field of public affairs were transferred into this new agency. Before that, we had an old colleague, Mickey Boerner. Mickey was in the same outfit. Mickey was a very famous guy in Germany. You may have heard this from others. Mickey became known all over Germany as "Guten Abend", because Mickey did, I think, a nightly radio broadcast five times a week. He came on with a commentary in German. Mickey as you know was American born, had a wonderful knowledge of German, with a lovely American accent, charming. So that's why he became known as Mr. "Guten Abend". His speeches were written by a very important guy, Hans Meyer, who is dead now. Hans Meyer was a very smart person, very bright, and I worked for Hans Meyer. Once in a while I was allowed to make a contribution to the speeches that became part of the commentary of Mickey Boerner's

We all then got transferred to the Agency. We kept on moving between Frankfurt and Nuremberg and Wiesbaden. I was stationed in Bonn when the transfer came to the Agency. Later I had my first assignment to Berlin.

Transfer To Berlin: Radio In The American Sector (RIAS)

I got transferred to Berlin, to RIAS. I'd never heard of the place. I knew nothing about radio, but it wasn't a big deal, because there were seven Americans there, and my position was absolutely clear: I was number seven. I was low man on the totem pole.

Q: Was Ed Schechter there at that time?

GERT: Ed was not in RIAS; he was in Bonn, in the radio division, together with a guy named Charley Lewis, who had problems with McCarthy, was called a Communist and all that.

Q: Ed was the founder of RIAS. He set it up in the early days.

GERT: In Bonn. Right. RIAS started broadcasting on the seventh of February, 1946. But all the planning before that was, indeed, by Ed and the radio division in Bonn. In 1953 the boss was Fred Taylor.

Q: I don't know Fred.

GERT: He's in pretty bad health in Salt Lake City. The deputy was Gordon Ewing, who was also in charge of the political division, and there was a guy named Brown, there was Travis. I don't remember the other fellows, but I was definitely number seven. I was in charge of public relations and listeners' mail.

Gert's Special Experience For RIAS During

East Berlin Uprising Of June, 1953

I'd like to jump right away and talk about my most fascinating day in RIAS which was the seventeenth of June, 1953, the famous uprising in East Berlin, which really changed the Cold War, if you will. It started with the death of Stalin in March of '53--I believe it was the 25th of March. I remember I sat in my little cubbyhole. My staff consisted of about 15 people in the listeners' mail section. I walked our German program manager, Gerhard Loewenthal, who later on became one of the outstanding TV personalities in Germany. I don't know what he's doing today; he may still be on the second German television channel, for all I know. Gerhard walked into the office and said, "Mark my words! The whole world is going to change as of today." He had just heard on the radio that Stalin had died. He was right, of course.

Well, this was in March. We soon noticed changes in East Germany. There was unrest, people were speaking up for the first time. On the sixteenth of June, the day before the famous uprising, Gordon Ewing called me and said, "Gerry, you're always a nosy guy. You're a bachelor and you like to see things. How would you like to run over to East Berlin and find out what's going on?"

Mind you, by this time there was no telephone connection between East and West. The communists had cut the telephone lines. While there was free access for us with our American license plates and so on, still, it was a bit of an adventure to go over there, particularly if you were on the staff of RIAS. RIAS was hated as the anti-Communist Cold War radio station and East German propaganda was always making nasty remarks about us, publishing cartoons, etc. We were always under attack by the East.

On the afternoon of the sixteenth, I drove down to the main drag in East Berlin, through the Brandenburg Gate, which was a primary crossing point. I found there were people gathering. When I got out of the car, I asked questions of what was going on. It seemed that the people who worked on the main drag in East Berlin, the famous Stalin Allee which was supposed to be the parade street, these guys were unhappy with labor conditions, and they said, "Why shouldn't we strike? We have a right to strike." Unbeknownst to me at the time some of these guys had marched to RIAS that afternoon. I didn't know this, because I was over in East Berlin. By the time I came back, I heard the story. What had happened, was that a delegation of workers from East Berlin had marched into RIAS and said, "You are our radio station. You have always spoken for us. You have been our voice, and we now want to get on the air. We are calling for a general strike."

Mind you, we're an American radio station in Berlin. A delegation from the other side comes in and says, "We want to call for a strike." What do you do as director of the radio station? Poor Gordon Ewing. He had to make the decision. Gordon made the right decision, together with his top German, a guy named Eberhard Schuetz, program manager, our top German. These two guys, Gordon and Eberhard sat down and said, "What are we going to do?" And they came up with a brilliant idea. They said, "We cannot give these guys our microphone. This would be a challenge to the East German regime. They could say we are

'warmongers' interfering in German affairs. So we can't do that. But we can report. We are reporters, after all. So we'll write a news item, and we'll say, in the third-person, that this afternoon, a delegation of workers from the East walked in, and this is what they said. They are calling for a general strike."

If you realize that the East German media, of course, did not carry any of this stuff, RIAS was the only one that put the word out of what had happened. The next day, the whole uprising was on. About 5:00 in the morning, the morning of the seventeenth, Gordon called and said, "Gerry, I think things are happening. Do you want to look."

I said, "Sure!" I rushed over to East Berlin. Crossing the Brandenburg Gate, I noticed trucks with Russian soldiers wearing helmets, blankets, rifles and bayonets. I had never seen the Russians dressed like that. These guys were serious. So I ran back into West Berlin, used the telephone, called RIAS and said, "The Russians are serious. These guys are sitting there in full battle dress." I kept on going back between East and West Berlin making phone calls to tell Rias newsroom what I was seeing.

A funny thing happened driving around in Berlin. I was observed. I'll come to that later. It was a nice, clear day that morning. I drove all over East Berlin. I watched the gathering of people, the momentum, the marches, the complaints, the pushing and shoving. I wound up with most of the demonstrators in front of the ministries on Leipziger Strasse, where the main government offices were. There were lots of people around, throwing rocks, knocking out windows. I was in that crowd.

Then something happened. A rainstorm came up, and I was completely drenched down to my underwear and my shoes. I decided, "Well, in the middle of all this excitement, I'm going to quickly go home, change, and come back." This saved me, because as I left, going to my house in West Berlin, I listened to the radio and heard--well, I'm not sure where I got the information; I'm not sure if it was on the radio--the Russians had closed the border between East and West, and people who were inside East Berlin, as I might have been, were caught. It would have been most embarrassing to be there as a government official, as a RIAS person. So I didn't have a chance to get back in, but by the time I got back in my dry clothes, the border was closed.

Let me come back to the first part. While I drove around Straussburger Platz, I did follow the marching columns, and it's true, I was the only noticeable American car. I was driving a green Pontiac with an American plate, US Army number--I think it was 3H2315. The East Germans noticed that car. In later days, they called that particular day, the seventeenth day of June, "Day X" which had all been plotted and planned for by the capitalist warmongers, the Americans and the Germans. East German newspapers reported that one of the instigators was driving around in a green Pontiac with plate number so and so. I was worried when I saw this publication which came out a couple of days later, for two reasons. (1) if they had identified me, I'd have trouble driving through the zone again, if I ever wanted to drive to West Germany. Somehow somebody's going to sabotage me. And (2) I wasn't that sure that my own government would have been proud of me, because we were

always leaning over backwards not to give any appearance that we were involved in anything. I thought I was going to be disavowed by my own bosses.

So I decided right there and then, I drove into the Grunewald which is a big forest in West Berlin, ripped off one of my license plates. Then, I went to the MPs and said, "I lost a plate," and got a new set of plates with different numbers. Also at my own expense, I took my car into a garage and had it painted gray. So the car looked different in color and it had new plates.

P.S. They made one mistake. They had one figure wrong on my license plate identification, so I was never called by the MPs, or anybody else following the publication in East Berlin.

In retrospect, what we can say about the seventeenth of June is that while we did not incite the uprising, without us it would have been of a different magnitude, because we were the only medium that reported on what was going on. That way the people of East Berlin and other cities in the East Zone could find out about the events and organize their own uprisings. There were protest marches all over East Germany on that day. So while we didn't plan it, there was no "Day X", we didn't organize it, we had nothing to do with that, we were the reporters. Reporting the facts was enough to make other people join in with the protest movement on the seventeenth of June. As you may remember, this was the first of the protests in the Eastern European countries in June '53. Others followed in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, etc.

So that was my big day in RIAS. I stayed there until 1954. I got transferred to Vienna as radio officer with Red White Red for a short period. At this time Red White Red, which was a USIS-run organization with some Austrian input, was being phased out. We were approaching 1955. It was the year that Austria got a state treaty, and there was no more need, nor was it appropriate for a foreign country to run a radio station. We were phasing out, but we were on good relations with the new successor organization, Austrian Radio. Fred Taylor, who had been there as director and Arthur Bardos, the program officer, did a wonderful job. I came in as a new face to provide radio liaison between the Embassy, USIS and the new Austrian Radio Network, which I then did until 1958.

1960: Gert Goes To Belgrade As Information Officer

In 1958 I was transferred to Washington, where I became Austrian and Yugoslav desk officer. I did this for about two years. I studied Serbo-Croatian at the Foreign Service Institute. In 1960, I was assigned to Yugoslavia as information officer and press attaché under PAO Keith Bowman.

Q: He must have been replaced rather shortly thereafter by Walter Roberts.

GERT: Correct. Walter became my boss. I worked for Walter, and Bob Haney was Deputy PAO. We had a great time. Of course, you know "non aligned" Yugoslavia was

maneuvering between East and West, with heavy leaning towards the East. I had the good fortune of seeing Tito a couple of times. Is it appropriate to tell an anecdote?

Q: Yes, any anecdotes are highly acceptable.

Tito Sees The USIS Film On John Glenn

GERT: Not so much an anecdote as it's a little experience which we enjoyed. Ray Benson, who by this time had been branch PAO in Zagreb, and later succeeded me, comes down and for a while we were working together in Belgrade. At one point we had this wonderful Agency film of Glenn, the first guy in space. You may remember that film. The one thing that you always remember about that is the heartbeat--BMM. BMM. BMM. We had it in English, and we had shown it, and a Cabinet official of Tito's, I think the guy's name was Soldatic, had seen it or heard about it, and he got word to the Ambassador, George Kennan. He got word to Walter Roberts and to us that Tito wanted to see the film.

So how do you show Tito a film? Tito doesn't go to a movie house. We went to Tito's White Palace, and there's a movie theater, a beautiful place. I remember checking in. We brought in our own equipment. Ray Benson, whose Serbo-Croatian was much better than mine, was going to read a script which we had prepared in Serbo-Croatian. I was going to run the projector. This team, he and I, were properly cleared by the Yugoslav security types. We entered the palace, they searched our baggage and looked us over carefully.

Everything got set up, and I was trying out the projector, when the fuses blew because there was a power load. Well, the security types who were standing around got mighty worried especially since more fuses blew. They thought I'd done something to the palace, and they were very worried about us. Finally, we calmed them down, tried another fuse, and then a bigger fuse and it held, and the projector worked. I thought it was interesting that while we were preparing for our show, waiters in tuxedos came around, offering us champagne in this communist country. It was all very much "the court." We said, "No thanks," we had to stay sober.

Then Tito came, finally. Ambassador Kennan was down in the auditorium with Tito, as they looked at the film together. Tito liked it very much. Soldatic, the chef de cabinet, came and asked if there was anything we wanted. I said, "Yes, you can ask Marshal Tito to sign our manuscripts so we can have a souvenir." So we had this manuscript from which Ray Benson had read, we had two copies, and Tito signed it. Tito!

Yugoslavia was a very interesting assignment. I enjoyed it very much because I spent a lot of time studying the language, driving around, meeting people. It was difficult because we were faced by a suspicious government. They had a press law which restricted the things we could put out. There was somewhat of an anti-American attitude although they were trying to use us in their struggle against the Soviet Union. So while we were being used, they didn't want to identify with us, and they didn't really let us operate freely. We had lots of problems.

Q: I was in the War College group that came to Europe that year. Of course, the arrangements were made by our military, by the Defense Department. We talked rather extensively with the Yugoslav Army personnel, anything from majors on up through generals.

GERT: What's the year, 1960?

Q: 1960. We were there in late March of 1960. The funny thing was that we found the Yugoslav Army, almost without any exception, to be very anti-Soviet. They talked very frankly about their dislike of the Soviets. They kept saying, "If these guys will do this, to hell with them. We'll go our own way and do this, that, and the other thing." The government per say may have been very anti-American. At least the military was quite the opposite.

On one other occasion, a friend of mine who was also a USIA type, Les Squires, was wandering through the park and saw a young couple sitting on the park bench about 6:00 one evening. He went over and listened, and they were listening to the Voice of America, an evidence of effectiveness.

I wondered if you got any feeling that the populace might be far more pro-American.

GERT: Absolutely. There was an identification with the West. You see, this is all part of the big struggle. Stalin had insisted that he was going to boss around Yugoslavia like he bossed around the other Eastern European countries. Tito early on said, "Listen [whatever he called them], we didn't get liberated by you guys; we liberated ourselves." This is the beginning of the defection, if you will, on the part of the Yugoslavs from the Eastern Bloc. Tito was a communist, but he had his own philosophy. He was trying to move away from Stalin more and more and take our help and get our assistance. For some time we gave military assistance to Yugoslavia. When we do give military assistance, we also influence the military of a country, and I think that's part of the reason why the military types were rather friendly towards us and were opposed to the Soviets, as you have observed, too.

Difficulties Of Working On Tito's Closely Controlled Society

I remember some incidents which were rather annoying. As information officer, under the press law my name would appear on the daily bulletin which we put out. The daily bulletin, you may remember, is something we put out in many embassies, the product of the Wireless File. I remember one day when in the United States we were observing Captive Nations' Day. It's a remembrance of the nations that lost their independence, the Baltic states, etc. There was a ceremony in Washington on this occasion. I carried that item in the daily bulletin and it made reference to the Soviet Union now occupying the Baltic states. This was construed by the Yugoslav foreign office as an "attack on a third country with which they maintained friendly relations." [Every time we carried something that was in the slightest bit anti-Soviet in our bulletin, we would get a reprimand.]

On this particular issue they called me in to the foreign office, and threatened that they'd declare me persona non grata if I carried anything like this again.

The Press Law made it difficult for us to operate and the Soviets were always busy complaining at the foreign office about anything we were doing.

Overall, I would say people were very friendly. If you got to talk to people, by and large they were pro-American. The only time anybody ever got mad at me was one day when I drove my Volkswagen and some guy thought I was a German. When I told him I was an American he rushed back into his house, got out a bottle of Slivovitz and made me drink with him. Ordinary people were nice and friendly and they liked Americans.

Q: What could you do in programming under circumstances of that kind, other than issue your daily bulletin? Could you ever get on radio?

GERT: I handled radio and television. I must say I have never felt so ineffective anywhere as in my contacts with Yugoslav radio and television. I offered them music and completely unpolitical stuff. They didn't even want to take that. They always gave me a fine reception, gave me a good lunch, treated me well, were very polite, but they completely shut the door to our material. It got to the point that if I would call and ask to speak to the head of the music department in Yugoslav radio and television, the guy would say, "I'm sorry. I can't talk to you. You've got to go through the international liaison section." They had an international liaison section, where they had two wonderful women who were charming and who insisted that I have no contact with anybody else in Yugoslav radio and television. I had to go through them. Their job in life was to block me. They hardly ever accepted anything, and if they did, it was complete apolitical. They might accept music or something about Yugoslavs, like TESLA. Yes, we could do carry stories about Yugoslavs who had come to America, showing what great contributions they had made to the United States, but otherwise, it was very hard to get anything on the air.

Q: You had an exchange program with Yugoslavia.

GERT: We had an exchange program.

Q: Who was handling that aspect of it.

GERT: That was handled by my cultural colleagues, people like Ed Bator and George Henry, another good colleague. Yes, it was small. Of course, we had the Fulbright program. We put out our daily bulletin. It doesn't sound like much, but in a country where you have censorship and no foreign media, the bulletin became much more of a symbol. Picking up the bulletin at the Information Center was an act of defiance, because there were always either cops in uniform or in plain clothes around, observing who was picking it up. As a matter of fact, I remember the wife of the famous Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas came and picked up the bulletin while her husband was in jail.

I want to come back to the mailing list. We put out a monthly magazine called Pregled, meaning "review". We mailed that throughout the country. We had a mailing list of up to 30,000. But what I found remarkable is that every so often we would get returns, and the returns would say, "address unknown," or "the recipient refuses to accept this shipment." But once in a while we got "umro" meaning "dead." I once went to Walter Roberts and said, "Walter, they must have had an epidemic in this village. Everybody's dead," because from a certain village, we would get back returns of, say, ten or 20 out of 35 sent were dead.

Walter allowed me to make a little joke. I sent out envelopes without return address, and I said, "Dear Sir, We are sorry to hear form the postal authorities that you have died. If you should be alive and would like to receive our magazine, please let us know." I got quite a few responses from people who were incensed and they said, "We are not dead!" which led me to the conclusion that the postal authorities from a certain town decided that their people shouldn't read our magazine, and they sent it back to us with all sorts of stupid stamps, either "dead" or "moved" or "doesn't want to receive it." So what we got back had absolutely no bearing on reality and what really was happening where the postmaster of a village was making the decision whether people should read stuff that came from us.

Q: When you got returns like this and discovered the people really were actually still there, still alive, were you then able to continue mailing without a return address? How did you handle that?

GERT: I think we did then send them again. We also canvassed the audience, saying "Do you want to continue to receive the magazine?" Some people were either afraid and didn't want it, others were defiant. I don't really remember what we did in this specific case when they were alleged to be dead.

1962: Gert Goes To Vientiane, Laos, As PAO

From Yugoslavia, I got a direct transfer to Laos. After two years in Yugoslavia, this was 1962. Walter wasn't very happy because he didn't think I should leave. I'd spent a lot of time in language study. I said, "It's all right with me. I have a chance to be a PAO there. I'll go to Laos."

So direct transfer to Laos, 1962. It was a little strange for a guy who had a European background and knew nothing about the Far East. I got on a Pan American plane and wound up in Bangkok, where it was hot as hell. As I got off the plane and walked down the gangplank, there was a guy at the bottom who said, "You're Gerry Gert!"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "Remember me?"

I said, "For God's sakes, of course. Phil Damon. I remember you from Germany." I knew him in 1946 or '47, when we'd both been in Public Safety. I'd been in De-Nazification, and he had been in criminal investigation in Wiesbaden. It turned out that when the PAO in Bangkok heard that Gerry Gert was coming, he was going to send somebody out to the airport, and the only guy who ever heard of Gerry Gert was Phil Damon.

Q: Who was the PAO? Was that Howard Garnish?

GERT: Howard Garnish. Very nice guy. Phil picked me up at the airport, first familiar face. Everything was unfamiliar. I spent two days in Bangkok and got myself some white suits and tried to get used to that heat.

Then I flew off to that strange place, Laos. Well, that was quite an experience. I really knew nothing about the place, language, or anything. A fairly large staff. I forget what we were, 20 some-odd people with more than a half million dollar budget. I didn't do too well. I wasn't satisfied with my own performance. I think this was the low point of my whole career, because I didn't know what was going on, frankly. This was a very complicated place. The war was on. There was fighting between the royalist troops and the Pathet Lao, the communist forces. The CIA was deeply involved in arming and directing the famous Meo, the mountain people. We were also, later on, bombing places in northern Laos, and ambassadors got involved in targeting. By now this is all out in the open; then it was a big deep secret.

My relations with the ambassador were not good.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

GERT: Leonard Unger, a very decent man.

Q: He was my ambassador later in Thailand.

DCM In Laos Tried To "Torpedo" Gert

GERT: The same guy, of course. Leonard was okay, nothing wrong. He was partially right, but he was also being egged on by a very nasty DCM. A DCM, as you know, can make the life of a PAO pretty miserable. This guy didn't feel that I gave him enough obedience or whatever. Phil Chadbourn was his name. Phil didn't like my performance, and he would whisper to the ambassador that Gerry Gert was no good. So the ambassador must have written a confidential letter to Ed Murrow.

I went on home leave in 1963 and went to see Ed Murrow and Don Wilson. Don, as we know, had a bad reputation, but I must say Don was very nice to me, had never seen me before, and Ed Murrow was just wonderful. We had a great talk, the three of us, in Ed's office. Ed said, "The ambassador's not satisfied with you, but you have a good record. You

don't have to go back to Laos if you don't want to. We'll get you another job somewhere. But if you want to, you can go back. I'll support you."

I said, "That's a challenge. I'll go back." I had a heart-to-heart with the ambassador. And things worked out fine. From then on, things were okay.

Shortly thereafter, Unger left and Bill Sullivan became ambassador. Much more important, the DCM left, and a wonderful guy named Coby Swank became DCM. With him it was just one big love affair, life became pleasant, and everything changed. My relations with Sullivan, the ambassador, and Coby Swank were perfect, and I enjoyed my tour.

I got very high recommendations from these guys, and I was picked by the Agency in 1965 to attend one of the service schools. I was picked for the Army War College, which I really didn't want; I wanted to go to the National. Bill Sullivan wrote a letter to the Secretary, and somehow or other they managed to get me into the National War College.

The Limits On What USIS Could Do In Laos

Q: Let me ask a couple of questions before you leave Laos. What do you think you were able to do in Laos? What kind of a program were you attempting to put out in that country, which wasn't very high in literacy and otherwise had a lot of difficulties?

GERT: You're absolutely right. I think there was a lot of commitment on the part of USIS. We wanted to show the State Department, we wanted to show the Defense Department we were in there. Actually, we couldn't accomplish much at all. Let me give you an example. My first trip to Luang Prabang, the royal capital, where we had a branch post. A nice guy, Jim Decou, was branch PAO. I looked at the PAO office and the building, and downstairs there was a small library. I walked in to see what kind of books were being read. Very few of the books had ever been taken out. But what struck me as I looked at the shelf was that they had red and green dots on these books. I had heard of the Dewey decimal system, or the Library of Congress system of organizing books. What's with these red and green dots? The librarian said, "The red dots are for French books, and the green dots are for English books." And that was our library. They had a few books in Thai and a very few in Lao.

What else? One thing that was good was the Lao-American Association where people could study English. That was quite good, a good effort, and I'd like to come back and talk about a wonderful person in that outfit. We had a cultural program, we sent some people to the States, but the cultures were so far removed from each other that there was danger that if they got too Westernized, too Americanized, they would find no place in Lao society.

Information? We were busy. We showed films, we had mobile film units going into the boonies, putting up generators and projectors and screens. I remember going to one of those, a place we had never been before, and I went along with the mobile unit. There were people who kept coming behind the screen because they wanted to know what was going on there. They thought these were shadow plays and there were people actually performing.

Q: What was the subject matter of the films?

GERT: We showed them the regular USIS catalog. It was hard to find something that really had any relation.

Q: You didn't have any film production capacity in Laos?

GERT: By now we did, yes. That was good. Thank you for bringing that up. That's one of the best things we did. We ought to give credit for this. This happened within the period of Hank Miller, my predecessor, "Big Hank." Whoever came up with the thought, we used the Lao technique of telling stories in sing-song. It was almost like Chinese opera. There's a moral, and the moral, of course, that we worked in was that the communists are no good. Straightforward. We would dress this up in Lao historical costumes with sing-songs and plays, and this was performed not as a one-time performance, but we did this on film, so we could then ship the films around the country. These were sort of morality plays. That, I think, was one of the most effective things we did in the country. There was even a special name for that: Mohlam.

We had a fine film unit, with a wonderful Danish American, Bonnesen was his name.

Q: Niels Bonnesen.

GERT: Niels Bonnesen! Right.

Q: He's dead now. A wonderful guy.

GERT: Yes, long dead.

Q: The great Dane. (Laughs)

GERT: Right. A big man. Poor guy died of emphysema. He smoked too much. He ran this unit. As a matter of fact, because Bonnesen was a Dane, focused on Hans Christian Anderson tales. Bonnesen took some old fairy tales, and we transferred these into local stories. All the Danish characters became Lao. The action took place in Laos and we put these on film and used them in the countryside. We had a whole troupe on the payroll of singers and dancers, maybe a dozen people, with instruments, traditional local instruments. I think that was the best thing we did in the country. It cost money, but money at that time seemed to be no object. Talking about money being no object, is not quite true, because USIA never has any money.

In this struggle, in the war, USIS came up with the idea at a country team meeting that we should drop safe-conduct passes on the Pathet Lao suggesting that they give themselves up. I must say by word of explanation that I had been a reserve officer in psychological warfare, and this is one reason why I volunteered for Vietnam, but that's a later story. As a reserve

officer, I had to do correspondence courses while I was in USIS, even in Vietnam. Somewhere in my textbooks, I found a safe-conduct pass signed by Eisenhower in World War II, which gave me the format. I prepared the same thing for the Lao situation in Lao, Vietnamese, French, and English, which in effect said, "If you surrender, you are going to be treated well." This was to be signed by the Royal Lao Army Command.

I brought this to a country team meeting and showed this pass and told everybody around the table, "Wouldn't this be a nice idea if we could drop these in areas?"

The ambassador said, "Great idea! Let's do it."

Q: Was this Sullivan?

GERT: This was Sullivan, yes. Sullivan said, "This is a great idea, Gerry, why don't you do it?"

I said, "I have no money. The only person around this table who's got money is Charlie Mann, Director AID." Charlie, by the way, later on became Director of AID in Vietnam, where I saw him again. Charlie is now living in Florida and has had a bad stroke.

So these were some of the projects we did in Laos. The ambassador then encouraged Charlie to pay for it, and AID then printed these. We had the Lao Air Force drop these leaflets over the Pathet Lao contested areas.

Q: Did you get much response from these?

GERT: I don't really know. As you know, in Vietnam we had the famous Chieu Hoi program, where we claimed 85,000 people came in. With or without the leaflet, I don't know. But in Laos, I can't really come up with any figures if anybody showed up. The fighting there, of course, was far away, and on a much smaller scale.

What else can I tell you about Laos? What else did we do? We put out daily bulletins, too, in Lao, very short because we didn't have much of a capability. It's interesting that among the local staff in Laos, I believe we only had two Lao working for us, and the highest ranking Lao was the man in charge of the motor pool. The others were all third country nationals, Filipinos, many Thais. The majority were Thais.

Q: The language is very similar, of course.

GERT: Right, particularly northeast. But the Lao just never had the level where they could come in and get these jobs. As we once said at a PAO meeting that we had in that area, when my colleague from Cambodia said the Cambodians suffer from an inferiority complex as compared to the Vietnamese and Thai, I got up and said, "Well my people in Laos, we don't have an inferiority complex. We are inferior to the rest of you guys," which

is not nice to say to the Lao, but that's the way I often felt about that place. There was just so little to work with.

In my time there, we had a couple of coups d'etat, and the right faction throwing out the middle-of-the-road faction. During one coup d'etat, I was going to the office, driving the PAO car; I got stopped by a man with a gun, a little Lao soldier with a big gun. He made me get out of the car. I saw such a look of hatred in his eyes, I've never seen that anywhere else. To me that was very surprising, because the Lao had been so gentle and charming and loving and full of dance, and here was this guy with this look, that if I'd made the wrong move, he would have killed me. He would have just shot. It shocked me a little bit to see how these people can, at the drop of a hat, change. That's where you get your "Killing Fields" in Cambodia, another very gentle, lovely people. It's so strange to me that the peoples of Southeast Asia can be so cruel, as we know from [the movie] "Killing Fields."

I wanted to come back to something I said before about our Lao-American Association. They taught English, which I thought was an important project. I attended classes, and the Lao learned little in a relatively long time. There were people who studied semester after semester, and they still couldn't carry on a conversation in English because it was just slow.

When I was on home leave, I was told by Elizabeth Hopkins, who handled the Binational Centers, that she had a candidate for director of the Lao-American Association, but she was not sure that the person, a woman over 60, could do the job. Would I, as PAO, look her over, and if I would say she was acceptable, they would hire her.

I went to New York to look up this "old" lady. She turned out to be a perfectly delightful, wonderful woman. She had been dean of students at the roughest school in America, New York City College, and she had just the right background. I said, "She is fine. She is right." Her name was Mrs. Wright. Ruth Wright then became our director. She did a wonderful job. Ruth Wright is still alive, although very, very old, and is now in Sun City.

Bert Potts, who did a fine job, was our CAO for quite some time. We had Bob Krill as press attaché, who did a fair job. We had Harry Manville succeed Bert Potts. Isabelle Thomas, who lives in Grass Valley in California, was assistant CAO. Ivan Klecka was field operations. And Perry Stieglitz was CAO for a long time. Perry, of course, married Princess Moun, the daughter of Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist premier.

Q: I see Perry very frequently.

GERT: A very colorful guy.

Q: Perry is one of the homeliest, but one of the nicest men I have ever known.

GERT: He's homely, but he has such a good voice and he's got such wonderful energy, great energy.

So that was Laos. Of course, we always had to acknowledge that our lifeline went right to Bangkok, and we have to thank our PAOs in Bangkok for many things, because we couldn't get paper or pencils if we didn't have the lifeline into Bangkok and the executive officer, and we had a fine relationship with Jack Zeller and Otto Strohmenger before that.

Q: I don't know who preceded Jack.

GERT: Howard Garnish was fine, and Jack O'Brien, of course, was a wonderful guy, a good friend of mine.

I don't know what else I can tell you about Laos. Do you have any questions?

Q: I've asked the questions I wanted to ask about Laos, so let's go on to the next assignment.

A Year At National War College (1965-66)
Then A Volunteer Assignee To Vietnam--In PsyOps

GERT: I had the good luck of being sent to the National War College. I was in the class of 1965-66. I did the War College African tour, which had some bearing on a later assignment. I volunteered for Vietnam which I did not have to do, having served in Laos. Since I was a reserve officer in psychological operations, I thought I could make some kind of contribution in this struggle. So I volunteered for that particular job in PsyOps, and got the job.

There was only one complaint I had against Barry Zorthian and I might as well get rid of it. Barry insisted that I get to Saigon right after I got through with the War College. If he had granted me six weeks' leave, I would have gotten a master's in international relations, because at the War College--

Q: At G.W.

GERT: At G.W., right. I would have loved that. But Barry insisted he needed me right away, which was nonsense, because he had Bob Delaney on the job, and Bob wasn't leaving yet. We had a hell of a long overlap.

Q: Maybe he was just afraid you wouldn't get there at all.

GERT: You know Barry. (Laughs) I did arrive in Vietnam and moved in with Bob Delaney. We had Art Bardos and Leo LeClair living in the same house with us. But Delaney was the big guy and a delightful person. Where is Delaney?

Q: He's the only guy that I know of who ever became a rear admiral in the Naval reserve. He was up at New Jersey, but I think he's gone to Florida.

GERT: He was in Rhode Island, and he's gone to Florida. I tried to track him down just two months ago in Newport.

As you know, JUSPAO had been in business and was in full swing. Barry was the boss. I had visited Vietnam twice or three times when I was in Laos, and got there before JUSPAO existed. Under JUSPAO, you had, of course, this large organization. I'll let others describe it. Half of USIS served in that place.

I'd like to stay with the psychological operations side, where I was assigned. The top man in the PsyOps side was a general. The guy who was still there when I arrived was General Freund, with whom Barry had a sort of ambivalent relationship.

By the time I got there, Freund was about to leave, and a new man from the Pentagon, Colonel Brownfield was assigned. I had looked him up in the Pentagon. He got his star and came out to Vietnam, and I was his deputy. We had this large organization called Psychological Operations Division.

Q: Were you operating out of Saigon? You weren't up country.

GERT: No, we were in Saigon. We had a joint organization, Joint Public Affairs Office, with Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines, AID and State and USIS personnel. In psychological operations, we had around 25 officers who were on the level of lieutenant colonel or commander, O5, as we call them in the military. We had some 60 enlisted men.

What were we doing? We had people in every province. The PsyOps advisor was on the staff of the Provincial Representative, who was usually a colonel, quite often a State Department officer, in some instances USIS officers, and they were the top Americans in the province. There were 42 provinces. The PsyOps advisor, was one of our people, and we provided supervision and support. We had a division in our organization called field operations, headed by, I believe, Maynard Ford, a very good guy. Field operations, of course, was the outfit looking at needs from food to staff to paper to leaflets, everything, and Ford was running a big shipping organization. We had our own fleet, the Otter fleet, that flew all this material and personnel to location.

Q: Did you know a man named Lou Ross over there?

GERT: Yes. Lou Ross. I do. (Laughs) Everybody chuckles at Lou Ross. A lot of weird characters. Lou was one of them. Carl Geber was one of my deputies. Carl was running the production division. These were the guys who were producing leaflets and posters and other materials.

Description Of Organization And Operations In PsyOps

We're talking about the breakdown of the psychological operation division. It was in JUSPAO, and we had three divisions just within the PsyOps setup. There was the

production division which I mentioned, field operations which looked after the guys' needs in the field, and there was a research shop, which came up with concepts and ideas for the production division and for anybody else. I think Doug Pike was associated with that; I'm not quite sure. He may have had a separate division. I'm a little fuzzy now. There was the North Vietnam division; that might have been Pike. He was a great expert on the Viet Cong and the Vietnamese Army and all that. I think they were part of that.

Vietnam, of course, was a great experience. Barry Zorthian being PAO was also an experience in itself. I have had a very good relationship with Barry throughout, I've had no complaints. Barry was a difficult guy, lots of people complain about him. I never had any problems. We did a lot of travel together. Barry had the habit of going out in the field every weekend. I'd pick him up and we'd have some flight laid on, a helicopter or whatever, a small plane. I think together we must have been in every province at least once. So there was a lot of travel, lots of time in the air, and I would always admire Barry's ability to get on the damn plane. I was always nervous and afraid. Barry would get on the plane and either do his "in" box or he'd fall asleep. He was most relaxed when we got out. Of course, he was great fun and asked wonderful questions. A lot of travel, a lot of briefings, a lot of projects.

One thing comes to mind. We were talking about the leaflet division, the shop that produced the leaflets and distribution, which was done mostly by the Air Force. We think, in retrospect, and maybe others will comment on this, too, that some 85,000 Viet Cong, Viet Minh, or North Vietnamese, turned themselves in under what we called the Chieu Hoi program. "Come back to our side with just cause," and all that. If you express it in money, that's much cheaper than shooting and killing and exposing our own forces to combat. We sometimes have a tendency to brag that these were the results of psychological operations. But in fairness, we must say that if an army is winning and they're doing well, they don't believe what they're fighting for, they're starving, they have no ammunition and the morale is very, very low--then that leaflet might be the last straw that breaks the camel's back. But otherwise, the leaflet itself will never really bring in enemy soldiers, no matter what. That's something that needs to be said, because so often psychological warriors, like myself, exaggerate their ability to bring in the enemy. That's often nonsense.

Q: I've forgotten whether it was Bob Franklin or Pat Nieburg who talked about one leaflet drop when there was a particularly tough assault by the North Vietnamese on one of the American installations. They had the whole periphery barb wired, several layers of it, and they dropped these leaflets giving them an opportunity to come in. He said a lot of them started coming in, while waving their hands with the leaflet, then they got hung up on the barbed wire and the Vietnamese behind the wire, the South Vietnamese, mowed them all down. That just simply destroyed the effectiveness of the operation, of course.

GERT: Sure. In years to come, people will get into the jungle of Vietnam and discover millions of leaflets lying there and rotting away. I think we papered that country over many times with leaflets. We also have to appreciate the fact that our own Air Force quite often did not deliver the leaflets--I am convinced that many a run was not performed, because you had to get down to low levels where you draw enemy fire. Some of our guys just

dropped a load in the ocean. (Laughs) They never got close to the target area. Lots of strange things happened in that war.

A word about organization. The PsyOps division was taken out of JUSPAO in a later phase, before the Tet Offensive. We became part of an organization called CORDS, which was headed by Robert Komer and then by Bill Colby.

Q: Later CIA director.

GERT: Right. Bill Colby. The general left, and I was chief of PsyOps, in CORDS. I just want to recount one incident of something that stayed with me. The CORDS deputy, I believe under Colby, was a three-star general. He called me in one day and wanted to know if we had lots of television sets placed throughout the country. Television was used, by the way, as one of the media to get our messages across. We had village sets that were placed under lock and key in a village. Fascinating operation.

How did you get a TV signal out? You may remember this. We had Navy planes that were circling over Vietnam, putting out a signal for about two or three hours until they ran out of fuel. They put out the TV signal. So we had the facilities, we could put film on television, we could put it out by Navy plane. We'd get a message out and it could be received on TV sets throughout areas which we controlled.

The general wanted to know if we were making optimum use of this medium, which cost a lot of money. He said to me, "Are you putting out subliminal messages?" I had to admit to this general that I didn't even know what a subliminal message was. Like so many, he must have attended some course and he had read about Skinner and psychology and the word "subliminal," and he thought that we could develop a subliminal message which would say, "The Viet Cong are no good. Turn yourself in to our side." Since I didn't know how to handle this one, he thought we were just wasting money and wasting time, and he didn't think much of it. Everybody who had taken a course in psychology thought they could make an offering to us.

The Tet Offensive

I experienced the Tet Offensive in 1968. That was quite a show, because across the street from where we lived, in a house which I shared with Leo LeClair and Bill Ayers, who was a Chinese speaker, a very nice guy who is retired and lives up in New England somewhere, was Vietnamese naval headquarters, and that was one of the targets of the Viet Cong. They attacked early on that morning of the Tet Offensive. They got very close, and fired rocket grenades into that building. It shook up our building, and we felt we were under attack all morning long. We crawled under our beds and spent a lot of time there, hugging machine pistols. Then, as you know, the attack on the Embassy in Saigon and the heroic effort by Colonel Jacobson and the MPs, who beat the Viet Cong out of there. It was quite a time.

About a month after that, I left. As I think I mentioned before, the Agency offered me Deputy PAO, with a promise of PAO, and I had a choice either in Nigeria or Zaire. Because I'd been to Africa on the War College trip, I could make a semi-intelligent choice, and I opted for Zaire over Nigeria. I'd seen Lagos and Kinshasa, and I preferred Kinshasa.

Return To Berlin - RIAS: 1968

While I was on home leave I had a message from Bill Weld. I knew Bill Weld, director for Europe, and I said, "What does he want from me? I'm a Far Eastern or an African hand." I went to see him, and he said, "There's a change. The director wants to talk to you." The director was Leonard Marks.

I went to see Leonard Marks, and he said, "I know you've been assigned to Zaire, but I want to change it."

I thought, "What the hell can come next after Zaire? Where else could they need me?"

He said, "We need you in Berlin, in RIAS."

I said, "That's terrible! I'd rather go to Zaire." But he saw through me; he didn't believe me. And he was right. I was, of course, delighted to go to Berlin.

Gert Directed To Reduce RIAS Staff And Increase German Government Funding Of RIAS

What was the problem? It seems there were some real problems in RIAS Berlin at the time. This was an expensive operation. It cost somewhere between \$4 million and \$6 million a year, a large staff, about six Americans by this time. There were almost 600 Germans on the payroll. A very big operation. I had some familiarity with RIAS having been there in '53. What was the problem? They had a very good American director, a guy named Bob Lochner, most capable.

Q: Son of an old correspondent.

GERT: Lochner of AP. Right. Bob was a most capable guy. The problem seemed to have been that Bob had crossed swords with the director. The director and the Agency had looked for ways and means of cutting down the RIAS operation to save money. Also some staff studies had been done with all sorts of expects, and Bob objected and he said so. Bob was ready to quit. He got transferred to Switzerland, PAO in Berne, and I succeeded him. I knew that I was starting out there with a few people with a few strikes against me. Lochner wasn't very happy with my coming there, and I knew I was stepping into something a little delicate. I had marching orders from the Director: "Come what may, you cut down that operation to save us money."

In the days of Bob Lochner and before him we had involved the German Government into paying more and more for the operation and upkeep of RIAS. But all the personnel were on our payroll; these were all American paid employees. My marching orders were to cut down on the amount of American money and commitment. This, of course, was done with the full knowledge of PAO Germany and PAO Berlin, and we developed a very comprehensive plan to put more and more of the cost on the German Government.

All this had to be done secretly. All this was classified. We wanted to give the impression that this was an American commitment, and we didn't want to admit that the commitment was paid for by the Germans. The Germans didn't want to admit that they were paying for RIAS. They didn't want to tell their own people, because the Americans were bragging about this great commitment, RIAS was one of the great pillars of the American commitment to Berlin, just as important, as we always said, as the presence of 6,000 American soldiers. That meant it looked kind of silly if the Germans keep on picking up the tab. So this had to be handled very carefully, with a great amount of "fingerspitzen gefuehl."

What we did was keep on increasing the German percentage. I believe that by the time I got there, the Germans were paying something like 20% or 30%, and every year we'd squeeze them some more. As you all know, by now it's public knowledge, we got the German Government to pick up 95% of the tab.

There was a year, you may remember, I think it was 1969 or 1970, when the Agency had to cut down tremendously on the amount of employees.

Q: 1970 primarily.

GERT: The Agency reduced overall worldwide staff by some considerable figure, 595 of which were employees of RIAS. I think we took almost the whole cut worldwide in reduction of national employees. Actually, what happened is they came off the American payroll and went onto a German payroll paid by the German Federal Government. This sounds all very simple. But what goes with it, which I am afraid quite a few colleagues, particularly in Washington, never really understood--and I'd like to say that now, very emphatically--the fact that when you have such a transfer of staff from the American payroll to the German payroll, there goes with it a bit of shift of loyalties. He who pays the piper calls the tune. The staff was always conscious of being German nationals, but now that they weren't even paid for by the Americans, they became very conscious of being Germans. At the same time, we cut down American staff. From six Americans, we went to two. I was alone with one deputy and for long periods I didn't have any deputy.

But The Cut Down And Funding Transfer Cost
USIA Substantial Control Of RIAS

So you cut down people and money, but some in Washington often believed that we still had the same control. We did not. I would still receive daily guidance from the Voice,

"Emphasize this, play this up, play this down," as if we were running the Voice of America. This is something which I think was never fully understood and appreciate in Washington.

Anyhow, we carried on and got the Germans to pick up more and more of the tab, put out a program which one could generally not object to. We did have some programs which, if examined by the program review board of the Voice of America wouldn't have passed muster because they were often critical of US developments. During the Vietnam War, when we carried items that would have been entirely too critical and in the wrong tone to be broadcast by the Voice. But to keep up our credibility and also our peace of mind with our German staff and our German audience, we had to go through with this, which I, as a program officer for the Voice, would not have been happy with.

Q: When you shifted the Germans to the German payroll, did they have to take any cut in pay?

GERT: No. As a matter of fact, Lew, they loved it because we are not as advanced as they are when it comes to social legislation. They have a better pensioning system, much better. Their retirement pay is much better than ours. Their health plan is much better. Once on the German payroll they got the same benefits that German employees have in the radio networks all over Germany, better pay, better health plan, better retirement pay, much better social conditions. So they were delighted.

There were other points of friction which we had over the years. There was the fact of the RIAS choir. Let me back up for a minute.

One of the problems that Bob Lochner faced before I got there was a man named Alex Buchanan. He was sent out by Leonard Marks to do studies on how RIAS could be cut down, cut out music and cut down the choir. RIAS, for quite a while had its own symphony orchestra, dance orchestra and choir on the payroll. Of course, that's unheard of when you think of an American radio station. Alex came to RIAS as an American radio expert and he just couldn't understand how a radio station could have its own choir, dance orchestra, so much money in the symphony orchestra, a radio play department that produced more radio plays than three networks combined in the US. This all looked too big. So he was out there trying to make all sorts of cuts and suggestions, and that's another thing that Bob Lochner didn't like and I didn't like either. I had the good fortune over Bob Lochner that I could say, "Well, I've got to study things. I'm new here. Don't bother me." But I was trying to get rid of Alex, who was always telling me he was going to report to Leonard Marks.

In answer to your question, the Germans were very happy, to go on the German payroll, and they're still enjoying that today. But the German Government wanted some influence. They wanted to have a say in the appointment of the German director and they wanted the German director to have more control. There was the matter of a new title of intendant. Intendant is a German traditional title for the top man in a radio station. That title had not been used except shortly, I think, after Schechter came up with the idea of the radio station.

It was used once in 1946, but the title had not been used since then for the German chief, and the American chief was always called the US director.

The government and the German who would most likely get that title was very interested in the recreation of it. I suggested it to Gordon Ewing, CPAO, who at first wasn't too happy with the idea, but we went ahead and created an intendant who would be the top German.

The man we picked as the top German was Roland Muellerburg, a wonderful guy who had worked for RIAS for a long time. Politically he belonged to the CDU, this Christian Democratic Union, conservative. He'd been an officer in World War II, had absolutely a clean background, a very good person, very loyal to us, but conscious of his German nationality, he became more conscious when he got the top title, and became the representative of the German Government in the radio station, because they paid him now. He was the intendant, he was paid by the German Government.

Obviously he acquired more power, and I lost power. The meetings used to be chaired by me exclusively. They began to be chaired by us in sort of a co-chairmanship. Later on, he ran the meetings. It wasn't an usurpation of power, but that's just the way the cookie crumbled. I had to be very tactful and I realized exactly what was going on around me.

Then came one phase which I found very difficult and very interesting. Intendant Muellerburg, along about 1974, was not feeling well. He had an operation and we had to look for a successor. Muellerburg, himself, was close to the Christian Democratic Party. The government at this time was headed by Willy Brandt, SPD. The Berlin government was headed by Klaus Schuetz, SPD. So both governments were socialist and so were most of the employees in German radio stations. But I would say less so in RIAS. Radio had become a rather ideological medium. As you know, radio is run by a quasi-government institution in Germany, not run commercial like in this country. There was a log of ideology, and there still is today, in the radio and television in Germany.

Political Difficulties In Changing RIAS Head

Now here we are in a country where the government in Bonn and in Berlin is SPD. We have a lot of SPD people, or close to the SPD, in RIAS, and we're talking about the top German official and what party he should belong to. I wanted a successor to Muellerburg who would also be CDU, because I felt we had enough SPD all around us. I didn't want a socialist as intendant. The German Government had to approve the new man since he was going to be on their payroll. They had to approve the choice and help make the choice.

I have to back up here for one minute. The union was an important player. They were pushing for higher wages and were trying to cut down on work time. They also wanted influence on management because of the German concept of co-determination, where the unions play an important role in determining policies of the organization, and they wanted to have an input in policy in the radio stations, which I surely didn't want to see. So there

was a bit of a controversial relationship with the union, and the union now felt they were in solid, particularly with the SPD. Another reason for me to insist on a CDU intendant.

This became very difficult. Whatever candidates we came up with--when I say "we," this was a joint operation between Muellerburg and me. We were in complete agreement, we had the same goals, we wanted to do the same thing. We focused on the former deputy intendant of the North German Radio in Hamburg, the richest radio network in Germany, Freihert Ludwig von Hammerstein, a man who was involved as a young lieutenant in the uprising of the 20th of July 1944 when along with other good people, he was trying to overthrow Adolf Hitler. Just one quickie about his background. His father had been the Chief of Staff of the German Army long before Hitler, and as such, he had lived in the same building where years later most of the events of July 20 took place. So Ludwig knew the building inside and out when he was in there with his pistol, and when the plot failed and all the plotters were arrested, Ludwig knew of a secret passage which he had discovered when he was a boy. He used the passage to escape from the Gestapo. So from the 21st of July, he hid in Berlin until the day the Russians marched in. That's his background. A great guy, still a friend of mine.

I flew to Hamburg and asked him to become our intendant. He said he would take it under advisement. All this had to be done in secret. I couldn't tell anybody in RIAS about these activities. I didn't want staff to know, because they were all finagling. There were some people who wanted to become the number one on the German side. I didn't want any of them to have that opportunity. This was also very difficult because the German Government was submitting names of candidates whom I wanted to turn down because they submitted nothing but socialists.

Finally, we discussed it with the German Government, and there was hesitancy. I went to see Egon Bahr who was a personal friend of Willy Brandt. He was the Federal German representative in the city of Berlin, a ministerial post. I had known him from my days in 1953, because he had been an employee of RIAS. I said, "Can I speak to you freely, without diplomatic niceties?"

He said, "Of course you can."

I said, "Well, tell Willy Brandt to show his generosity and his magnanimousness by not insisting on a socialist. I want a CDU man. I have a name here of a perfectly good person. I want your approval."

He said, "I'll find out. I'll call Willy Brandt." A couple of days later, he said Willy Brandt wanted to make the offer of intendant to Spangenberg who was State Secretary in President Heinemann's office and a member of the SPD. If Spangenberg wanted the job, I could not deny him that. However, Spangenberg didn't want the job, and therefore we got agreement on Hammerstein.

By this time, the story began leaking. I was very unhappy about that, and I had to make an announcement. One person whom I couldn't consult in time was the governing mayor of Berlin, Klaus Schuetz, who, when he heard about it, called the American Minister in Berlin, David Klein, and complained about me not having checked it out with the governing mayor. The Minister called me and balled me out and complained to Embassy Bonn. This was a five-ring circus, but I prevailed. We got von Hammerstein. He became the intendant, and he served two tours from 1975 to 1984 or '85. He's now retired.

Von Hammerstein was succeeded in 1985 by another CDU man, and right now, I believe the guy who is intendant is also CDU. So this is interesting because we now have a situation in RIAS Berlin, as I understand it, where Mr. Wick and the CDU mayor of Berlin had the idea, along with Axel Springer, to have a RIAS-TV program, which is in operation now.

Q: Is that part of the WorldNet system?

GERT: They are thinking of using WorldNet as an outlet. May-be one or two items from WorldNet can be used, but generally speaking, I don't think WorldNet is tailored for broadcasting in Berlin under the circumstances.

Q: I see. So it is entirely a RIAS operation.

GERT: It's a RIAS operation, but as I understand it, it's got no more than 35 or 40 minutes a day of programming. I think they were trying to do a breakfast show and they wound up with an evening program of 35 minutes, so it's part-time TV.

When I talked about the financial and personnel changes in RIAS and everything else that happened there during my tenure it becomes clear why I stayed there so long. You had to have continuity, you had to know the players, and you had to know the language and all that. I guess that's why the Agency kept me in Berlin as long as it did.

I quit in 1980, at which time I turned 60. As you know, that was mandatory at the time, and I've been a retiree ever since.

The Related But Differing Roles Of RIAS And Radio Liberty/Radio Europe

Q: Would you mind commenting a little bit on the differentiation between the objective of programming at RIAS and something like Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe, which we now, of course, control also?

GERT: RIAS has a similar role in broadcasting to the GDR in the German language only, as Liberty has in broadcasts in the languages of the Soviet Union, primarily Russian, and Armenian, Georgian, Uzbek, or whatever. RFE broadcasts in the language of the satellites, from Polish to Czech, Hungarian, Romanian, Bulgarian, except for German. East Germany

was covered by RIAS. That was our primary target audience, the East Germans. However, our broadcasting to West Berlin became almost as important as a status symbol of our presence, and commitment to Berlin as our broadcasts to East Germany.

Of course, our programs were targeted primarily for the listening audience in East Germany with topics which were of great interest to them, world topics, but also those dealing with developments inside East Germany, just like RFE talks about developments inside Poland in their Polish broadcasts.

Did SPD Control Of German Government Result In Softening RIAS's Tough Broadcasting To East Germany?

Q: In the case of RIAS, since the Socialist Government was intent on the opening to the East, once the large majority of financing passed to the German Government, did you notice either an attempt or in actuality a shift of programming more toward what the Germans wanted to broadcast than what the Americans wanted to broadcast?

GERT: At the time that I was there, we were still in the middle of the Cold War. There was no Gorbachev, there was no opening. There was, on the part of the SPD, always a sort of a yearning for the thought of reunification. This is part of the Ostpolitik, under that rubric. You will find that there was an inclination to be less hawkish, if you will, and make more concessions and hoping that if you kiss them long enough, they'll be nice to you. That was there at the time.

What has happened now, I can't really comment on. I don't really know. I suspect, though, that contained in your question is the suspicion, that I would share, that there would be more of an accommodation now, not only from the SPD, but also from the FDP, with Genscher, the Foreign Minister, most likely in the lead, yes.

You could always wind up at loggerheads when it comes to policy. You knew it was a miracle that you didn't have more fights between the Germans and the Americans, because sometimes our policy did not go together. But in my days, generally speaking, we were lucky inasmuch as our foreign policy objectives tended to be parallel.

Evaluation As To Effectiveness Of RIAS

Q: What kind of information did you get as to the effectiveness of the RIAS broadcast into East Germany?

GERT: It was a difficult project when you can't physically reach your audience. You couldn't conduct a Nielsen survey or a Gallup poll. I would say listeners' mail was an important factor, the amount of mail we got, the amount of attacks on us by the East Germans. If we weren't effective in some shape or form, they wouldn't have paid any attention to us, but the constant attacks on us by the East German media showed us that it hurt. Somehow or other, we got through. Also, of course, jamming. They spent more

money jamming RIAS than we spent putting out a program. You've heard that same thing being said about the VOA. We were heavily jammed by East German transmitters throughout. I understand they have stopped that recently under the glasnost policy. I'm not sure of that, because East Germany doesn't necessarily follow Gorbachev. But those were the three main measurements, if you will, the jamming, the listener mail, and the attacks on the station.

Q: What year was it that you went to RIAS?

GERT: The second time was 1968 until '80.

Q: The wall had been up many years.

GERT: The wall was up since 1961, yes.

Q: I was going to ask you if you had noticed any difference in the program or in the reaction from East Germany but that was too far after.

GERT: Yes. I think we were less Cold Warish. I believe that in the '50s and '60s, the Cold War was at its height, and we would have been, in tone, a little more aggressive. Of course, we were never as aggressive as they were, but still, we would have been a little more. I remember, for instance, something that we did early on which sort of petered out, and which today wouldn't be possible. There was a political cabaret, a European way of making fun in a jocular manner by song, poetry, and sort of kidding or sometimes being pretty heavy handed, making fun of the opposing side. We had one of the best political cabarets called "De Insulanert", which means The Islanders in which we were poking fun at the East German Government. That was pretty heavy stuff, very, popular in my first time at RIAS. By the second time I got to RIAS in '68, it was sort of petering out, so there was, in that sense, a change in tone and trend, yes.

A Brief Return For Final Comments About USIA (JUSPAO) Efforts In Vietnam

Q: I'd like to go back just briefly to your Vietnamese experience. I'm not sure I ever heard anybody on the JUSPAO staff talk extensively about whether they had any information or any feeling as to exactly how well they were doing or whether they were getting any of their objectives across. Under the conditions that existed, I suppose that was exceedingly difficult to obtain anyway. But did you have any kind of a line or feeling as to whether you were getting your messages across or what it was doing, what the reaction was of the people who were your audience?

GERT: Very hard to say, Lew. I would say, overall, as I think back, very little. We had very little feedback. We had our problems in helping to run the Vietnamese Information Service. There was, parallel to our organization the Vietnamese Information Service. They had to run the information in their own country. We tended to do too much for them. I think that

goes for the military, too, but in the final analysis, it was their country. Their service wasn't very strong. We worked with them on all levels--Saigon and the provincial level, local Vietnamese service, and they often were pretty bad. They did not have the very best personnel, they were not very ambitious, and they didn't have many resources. Whenever possible, we helped with equipment. We helped on all levels. But it was a weak effort, and we sometimes went on combined operations with American equipment, American people helping out, or local employees of ours, who were generally better than the Vietnamese staff. It was an uphill battle. I don't know how much we really accomplished.

Q: Some of the people I have interviewed have made the point that because we were doing practically the whole thing ourselves...

GERT: Too much so.

Q: Yes, too much so, we never had any idea whether the Vietnamese themselves would do it or be able to do it, if we let them do it their way. I suppose you can argue in either direction, but what is your observation from what you know?

GERT: I'd have to say that what made me so sad is I found that our guys were not as motivated as the communists were. Those damn communists were motivated. Our friends, our South Vietnamese friends and allies, didn't go at it with that motivation. Often they were on the job more for the money or position although the pay was very poor, too, I must admit. I really don't remember any outstanding people in the Vietnamese Information Service. Maybe I'm doing them an injustice, but I can only talk about memories from many years past, and nobody comes to mind that I can think of as an outstanding information specialist.

Q: I'm interested in that because as PAO in Thailand, I felt that on a much lower scale, of course, although we were in a big country program, that we had the same kind of a problem and we were constantly under pressure from Washington to turn this and that part of the program over to the Thais, none of whom wanted it.

GERT: Yes, yes.

Q: I felt that one of the things that caused [Frank] Shakespeare to decide I was not worth very much was the fact that I simply told him, "If the Thais take this over, it's going to go to pot." He kept asking me, "How long, Lew, do you think it will take the Thais to take over the motion picture program and so forth?" I guess I was a little facetious, and I said, "Frank, I think it's going to take about six or seven years." What I should have said is, "I don't think they'll ever do it." He thought I was trying to drag out the turnover to the Thais, and it didn't do me any good to have made that joke.

GERT: I would say, Lew, it would have taken the Vietnamese even longer.

Q: Well, I think the Thais never would have done it, really.

GERT: It's hard to generalize. The Vietnamese can be very effective and very efficient. I suspect they can be even sharper than the Thais, if I may generalize.

Q: I think so.

GERT: When you look back into Southeast Asia in the days of colonialism, it was the Vietnamese who were the top people working for the French, who were running Laos and Cambodia. I'm sure they were sharper than even the Thais, and I have a great opinion of the Thais. But it's different. This struggle wasn't that clear cut. There was this crosscurrent of motivation. They didn't know what side they were on. Some of them didn't like the government in power, and some had sympathies, not necessarily with the communists, but with something else of a different nature. There was all this confusion. There was no real identification with what they really stood for. It was all part of the battle.

Q: Now a more cynical approach. What did you think was the motivation of the Americans, given, as it must be, that they had to observe a good deal of this attitude on the part of the Vietnamese? Were they really dedicated, or were there some who were and some who were not?

GERT: Of course.

Q: Did they really believe in what they were doing?

GERT: I would think, like in any organization, you'll find all kinds, and we had quite a few who didn't give a damn. Some didn't like to come to Vietnam, some volunteered. I would say that by and large, among the Americans, the vast majority were motivated and believed in it. Many of us believed, rightly or wrongly--I admit I was wrong, but I believed it at the time--the business about the monolithic communist menace--all the slogans, the domino effect, if you don't stop it here it will cross the rest of Asia and other nations will fall, and so on and so on. So I think that Americans, by and large, were motivated, were serious, dedicated, devoted, much more so than the Vietnamese, I'm afraid.

Q: One final question about this. You remember that fairly early on in the American intervention in Vietnam, there came the communist attempt to take over Indonesia. Of course, the Indonesians reacted very violently in the massacres of the communists, particularly the Chinese communist members of the population. A lot of people have argued that if it had not been for the show of force that the Americans were making with reference to Vietnam, the Indonesians might never have withstood that attempt to take over the government, but they felt motivated and supported to rise against that attempt largely on the strength of what the US was doing in Vietnam. Do you have any feeling on that, or did any of the people with whom you associated make any remarks about it?

GERT: No. I must say this is the first I've heard of this, Lew. It seems to me from where I sat, of course, I was never in Indonesia, so I'm speaking more as an observer from far away.

It seems to me that what happened in Indonesia is that the military in Indonesia, coming back to what you said about Yugoslavia, had had very good and close relations with our own military. We have had civic action programs in the Indonesian military, largely indoctrinated by Americans. I met some of these guys who served in Indonesia at the War College. I think that a lot of indoctrination took place, the military was anti-Communist, and when this situation arose in Indonesia, these guys jumped in and, as you know, the blood bath ensued.

One other factor, I think, though, is also an ethnic racial struggle there. I think there were so many ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, who, rightly or wrongly, were identified with the communists. So this also became a blood bath of Indonesians killing Chinese, indiscriminately. Many of them were communists, maybe the majority, I don't really know.

So you had these two factors, the military having been indoctrinated in anti-Communist matters, you had Sukarno's problems, that's something else, but you also had this ethnic struggle between the Indonesian and the Chinese. The last factor that you mentioned is news to me, but I believe that the atmosphere, most likely the military presence aided in the stance or the position that the military could take in the internal battle stance. That's quite possible, although I had not heard of this before.

Q: I think we'll close the interview by saying that that ethnic differentiation between the so-called overseas Chinese and the ethnic populations under which they have migrated is not unique to Indonesia. It exists in Thailand and exists in Vietnam, and almost any other place where the Chinese have gone.

Gerry, I do thank you very much for this interview. It's been a very interesting one, and I am very happy to have it on tape.

GERT: Thank you, Lew. I enjoyed doing it.

End of interview