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

AMBASSADOR JULIAN M. NIEMCZYK

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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Assignment in United States
Kelly Field, Texas
NSA liaison with JCS

INTERVIEW

Q: This is December 16, 1991 and an interview with Ambassador Julian M. Niemczyk on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Mr. Ambassador, I wonder if we could start with your telling me where you grew up, were educated, etc. before we move into the rest of your career?

NIEMCZYK: I was born and raised in Oklahoma in a military reservation, formerly an Indian reservation, Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. My father was an artillery officer and Ft. Sill is the artillery center of the United States. My father was an immigrant from Krakow. He came to the United States when he was 13 or 14, got his education, married my mother, a Virginian from Roanoke, and being in the military was assigned to Ft. Sill. I spent the first 16 or 18 years of my life in landlocked Oklahoma. Although the military generally moved around, my father had a 16 year assignment there.

Q: He must have really known his guns by then.

NIEMCZYK: Yes. I went to Oklahoma University and then I was inducted into the 45th Division, the Oklahoma division, along with four other divisions that President Roosevelt inducted at that time. That started my career with the armed forces.

Q: We are looking at the foreign affairs apparatus, more or less, so I do want to hit rather at the beginning on your attaché thing, not just your ambassadorial thing. Before that, I wonder if you could go through a little bit of your career leading up to getting in the military attaché business?

NIEMCZYK: Yes. I followed my father's footsteps. He was an artilleryman and I was in an artillery National Guard unit which was inducted, as I said, in the fall of 1940. I was an enlisted man, but in the National Guard I was rather high ranking for my age of 20. I was a five-stripe tech sergeant only because the unit was in Lawton which is adjacent to Ft. Sill, and, not for my talents but the people who appointed me to this tech sergeant position instead of a $21 a month private, did so because they knew my father was a telephone call away and would come in and share his expertise in getting this unit activated.

A year and a half later we had left Oklahoma and transferred to Abilene, Texas. I was selected for Officers Candidates School and back to Ft. Sill I went to Artillery School and

was commissioned a second lieutenant. I learned how to fire an artillery battery, etc. and spent a year and a half with an artillery unit. I became a battery commander.

Then fate and fortune stepped in and I had a chance interview with a Major from Washington, DC, who was scouting for people, he said talented people, for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). I seemed to impress this Major and he said he thought the OSS could utilize my services. I will never forget that during the interview about my education, how I grew up, what my hobbies were, etc., he suddenly said, "Would you have any concern about jumping behind enemy lines?" At the age of 22 I wasn't sure but said anyway, "Sure I would be prepared to do that." He said, "All right. You just go back to your unit, say nothing to anybody and you will be hearing from us."

I went back to my artillery battalion and within two weeks a telegram came in from the War Department to my battalion commander, a Lt. Colonel, who was very annoyed that he would get this piece of paper. He called me in and said, "Lieutenant, I have a piece of paper here telling me to transfer you to Washington, DC to something called the Office of Strategic Services. What do you know about this?"

I said, "I have no idea about this. This is a surprise to me. What does it say?" He read it. It gave a reporting date and that sort of thing.

Making that long story shorter, he said that he was going to deny the transfer. I said, "Well, Sir, it seems to me that the War Department has made this not a request but a directive and I will just stand by until you tell me what to do. But I feel I should be on my way." Well, the next day he called me in and said that I had better pack my bags and go to Washington, DC.

So I joined the OSS and underwent training in the Washington area having checked in to the headquarters which was in two different places. One was in these old temporary buildings along what is now the reflecting pool between the Lincoln and Washington Memorials and another administrative headquarters was in the building complex on the hill across from the State Department where Marine buildings have been or something.

Q: There was a brewery there or something.

NIEMCZYK: Yes, there was a brewery there at the time or in the vicinity.

We were in and out of those buildings, but in the process of training in the Washington area. Saturdays and Sundays we checked into some of the less expensive hotels in Washington. Sunday evening we were put into trucks with the canvas down and driven out to Fairfax County, very near areas where I have been living the last 20 years and which was then farm land. The OSS had rented large estates that could house 20 or 30 trainees. The theory was that we could go out and throw dynamite at something that had been constructed, like a bridge, or a stone wall. We had training in sabotage explosives and psychology. There is a book entitled "Assessment of Men" that was written by

someone whose name I don't recollect, but it gave a good account of the kind of training that we underwent for intelligence--sabotage, espionage, guerrilla warfare, etc.

I went through 3 one-week trainings and 1 two-week training, all the time being shuttled out to Fairfax. We were given a code name. We knew there was a group of 30 and knew each other by "Joe" or "Mark," whatever nickname we chose. My name, as you know, is Julian but I never cared for that name much so I went by the nick-code name of "Jay." The psychological assessment was quite unique. It was something that I had never experienced before. It was probing and delicate questions about your personal life, etc.

I passed these courses and received my assignment to go to CBI. I was in the Burma campaign with OSS for two years.
We had a very successful campaign. If you are familiar with the China, Burma, India and Pacific area and the battles that were fought there...The Burma campaign was not only one of the early successful...there were a lot of successes throughout the Pacific...but we completed our assignment in April, 1945. When the war was terminated months later we were months ahead of the final termination. We had achieved our objective in nullifying and deactivating the Japanese forces in Burma.

Q: Were you working...we had that one group, Merrill's Marauders that was there, but this was an infantry unit...

NIEMCZYK: I should explain that there were the Merrill's Marauders, the Chindits, two Chinese divisions and the British Y or Z forces. Over a four year period there were only about seven hundred Americans, including some Nisei, but we would recruit the local natives--the Kachins, the Karens, the Shans, the Nagas, to help build light airplane strips. And there was one person who was chiefly responsible for that, a Colombian missionary, a Catholic priest who had been there for some ten years and he was our go between to help out getting what became a force of ten thousand guerrillas. We broke up into companies and battalions. But we were always behind the lines paving the way, if you will, for the Merrill's Marauders, the Y force and the Chinese army and the other elements to work their way down from north to south. We had a rather good record to the extent that we received a Presidential citation for our efforts.

Q: Was Roger Hilsman, who later became Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Research for Asian Affairs, in your group?

NIEMCZYK: Roger was in our group and a close friend. I still see him periodically these days. At least once a year with our Veterans of the Detachment 101 Association.

After we completed our campaign in Burma, 50 percent of us were sent to China and 50 percent of us were sent either back to the States or to Europe. I went go to China. Roger, as you know, but I will throw this in, just as I had a special assignment, his assignment was to jump in to Hsian, where his father had been a prisoner of war. You know that story?

Q: Yes.

NIEMCZYK: My assignment was to take a team of five into Canton via White Cloud airfield and to open up the Consulate and accept the surrender of the Japanese element there. An Army Air Force C-47 flew us in and it was the fastest landing and take off that I had ever seen. The crew took some risk in flying in because neither they nor we really knew what to expect there. We unloaded, threw our dufflebags off and the plane took off immediately. I remember vividly this wood panel station wagon filled with half a dozen Japanese coming from what appeared to be an operations building for this airfield called White Cloud which is Canton's main airfield today. There was this station wagon coming towards us and we had no idea whether it would do us in or what. The word was out as to how the battle was going and the first atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima by that time.

Q: This was before the one that was dropped on Nagasaki?

NIEMCZYK: Yes.

This group of six Japanese got out of the station wagon. There were salutes. I had a five-person team, as I said, myself the leader, a communications person with hand driven radio, and a Nisei American to handle the language. This Japanese Colonel came up and we saluted and through our translator/interpreter he said, "We are prepared to surrender the White Cloud airfield and offer any services and transportation." Well that was quite a relief and to this day I have his saber, which was presented to me.

We went into Canton and found satisfactory, if not pleasant billet. The Swiss had been the caretakers of our Legation there in the Shameen district of Canton. Within a week or ten days the State Department officials came in, took the keys from me and opened up. I went about my business of identifying Chinese collaborators with the Japanese. I remained there three or four months and after the termination of the war, went to Shanghai where I was doing odds and ends just waiting to go back home.

That started me into the intelligence field. When I returned to the States I had a long 90 day rest and recuperation and then went back to the artillery processing center at Ft. Sill again...back home to mother's cooking again and that sort of thing.

Having been with OSS I received an assignment with G-2 (the intelligence branch of the US) the US Army in the Pentagon. At this high level in the Pentagon, at this point I had been promoted and was a captain, my first permanent assignment in Washington and subsequently had a number, 3,4, or 5 over a 31-year period in the Armed Forces. I spent about eight months doing staff intelligence work.

Then I was assigned to go for one year of duty with the Joint Task Force of Operations Crossroads (the joint atomic bomb tests). I didn't go out to where the tests were being

done, however. My job sent me from Washington to Hollywood where I was doing security work with Technicolor, MGM and Hal Roach Studios. What was I doing there? These highly secret, at that time, films were being flown in from Eniwetok, turned over to a group of five of us. There was a major who was in charge, I was a captain, one of four. We worked with these Hollywood studios developing this classified film. It was a pleasant task that lasted almost a year.

Q: I might just as an aside say that much of that film was on TV showing our people blithely taking motor launches around all these ships that were radioactive as all hell and many of them are suffering the consequences today.

NIEMCZYK: Yes, that is dreadful in those instances where after effects set in over a period of years. As a matter of fact one of the four of us, an army major who became colonel, picked up leukemia and died from it while he was on active duty. His wife has often wondered whether handling these boxes of films had anything to do with it. The rest of us had nothing like that.

That job kept me in the security business. After that I was assigned to the Army Counter Intelligence Corps. I worked with Counter Intelligence for a year and a half until the Air Force became a separate department. I had a friend who assisted me in making a departmental transfer from the Army to the Air Force.

Q: About 1948 wasn't it?

NIEMCZYK: Thereabouts, actually 1947. I moved simply from a billet in the Counter Intelligence Corps at Ft. Meade, to a billet in the headquarters of the OSI in...back to the Pentagon, back to Washington, where a person who became a dear friend of mine, Joe Carol, who was with the FBI and had been handpicked, appointed a Brig. General, to organize, establish and get moving the Office of Special Investigations for the Air Force. General Carol became a three star General over a period of years and died just a year ago.

I spent a year and a half in the Pentagon with OSI and was assigned to Far East Headquarters as the director of OSI's Counter Intelligence Division, in the Meiji Building in Tokyo.

Q: As a historical footnote, was counterespionage at the beginning completely devoted to Soviet efforts or were you looking elsewhere too?

NIEMCZYK: I had orders in my hand in April, 1950 to go, accompanied by my wife, to Tokyo, the Far East OSI Headquarters. In 1950 the Korean War broke out. My wife and I were disappointed that she had to stay in Washington. I went over for a one-year unaccompanied tour and then she joined me. To answer your question, the focus out of OSI Headquarters was primarily North Korea and the movements of the Chinese Communists.

Q: I was really thinking earlier on when you first got into counterintelligence, '46 or '47. The Cold War hadn't fully set in, but what was your attitudinal feeling? Was it the Soviet Union and their efforts in the United States?

NIEMCZYK: I understand what you are saying. I can remember some of the case histories at the Army CIC in 1947, early '48, that we would use, in Trieste, for example, and that part of the world, clearly bringing in the Soviet potential, the positioning of agents or personnel, etc. So as early as that there was a focus of the counterintelligence, espionage towards the Soviets. However, my relocation to Tokyo again put me back into the focus of the North Koreans, Chinese and their movements, etc.

After two and a half years in Tokyo, I returned to Washington for about eight months, during which time my former OSS colleagues talked with me about a possible tour with the CIA. It had gone from OSS, to CIG, into the Central Intelligence Agency. At this point I said that I would like that very much and asked what they had in mind. They said that there was a position in the Philippines that they would like me to take on. A special job.

I was transferred from the Air Force OSI for a two-year to a four-year tour on loan to CIA. My cover was some numbered 3166 air activity group at Ft. Belvoir. I spent about six months at the headquarters of the Far East Division and went out, with my wife, to Manila. My light cover was the Air Attaché Office at the Embassy. That sort of started me off on Embassy assignments which, depending on how long you want to go on this...

Q: Obviously this is an unclassified interview, but the world has changed and we are trying to get a picture of how we felt and were working at the time.

NIEMCZYK: It was the beginning of one of three attaché US Embassy assignments in my military career. Manila was first, Warsaw was second, Prague was third and we will get to that later on.

I was in the Attaché Office, a major, and the legitimate attaché was a bird colonel. He and I were called into a room in the Pentagon before either of us went out. We met. He was not overjoyed. He felt he was going to be burdened with an additional officer, but one that he didn't have total control over. I had two bosses. One, who was the Chief of Mission in the Embassy in the Public Affairs, and another one across the street in the AID Building, Lovett, a retired army general.

I checked in and one of the assistant attachés, who became a very dear friend of ours, really looked after us getting settled. My job was to do liaison with G-2 of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. That worked so successfully that the CIA would hand select as a result of some of my observations, some of my contacts...and I knew all of them. It also gave me an excellent entre into the hierarchy of the Armed Forces of the Philippines which bothered the Air Attaché, my paper boss, and the Army and Naval Attachés. But it was clear to the senior Filipino officials who my backing organization was.

This enabled me to do my job a little bit better and more successfully. I would identify and select, with G-2's, the Army of the Philippines, approval six people at a time. We would get them to Clark Air Force Base and on an unidentified airplane fly them to Saipan or some island out in the Pacific where they would undergo four weeks of intelligence training by CIA personnel. They would come back to the Philippines and either pursue their intelligence field in the armed forces or some of them wound up in a newly formed NICA (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency), which was the Philippine CIA. I think it still exists today.

This was my job, to work with the Philippine military people. I was asked if I would like to extend for two more years there at the Embassy and my wife and I had become friends with the Filipinos and the Spanish, etc. so we accepted the extension. Thus we wound up having four years working out of the Attaché's Office at the American Embassy in Manila.

Q: What was the government situation like when you were there? How did our Embassy relate to it?

NIEMCZYK: Very favorable relations. Very good relations. It was the time that the US was supporting and courting Magsaysay who became President. Like our President Kennedy he met with a tragic ending in an airplane crash piloted by none other than his commanding officer of the Philippine Air Force. I remember that so well. But we had excellent relations there. The US-Philippine course was on course and going very well. AID was doing its job, helping a great deal.

I did a lot of traveling throughout the country. I was invited, and at that time I guess the only American who was invited on a seven day trip with a Philippine Navy ship going to the Sulu Archipelago and stopping at Jolo, going to Sandakan, North Borneo, back through Turtle Island and the Palawan Island and on to Manila. That was an experience I could spend an hour on, which I won't. But it brought me much closer to the people with whom I would deal. They were my hosts.

Q: What was your impression of the Philippine military at that particular time? Although independence was gained in 1946, they still depended heavily on the United States.

NIEMCZYK: My recollection would probably be prejudice, but I thought they were doing very well with what they had. I had a chance to visit their military academy at Baguio. A number of their leaders had actually been graduates of the US Naval Academy and West Point. They were there overseeing and leading the way. So I would have had favorable observations...Surely the army and to some extent the air force and to a lesser extent the navy.

Q: Then you moved from a friendly environment to...

NIEMCZYK: June, 1956, I returned again to Washington. I mentioned one of the assistant air attachés who had been so friendly to me and my wife as newcomers and outsiders, although I was an Air Force blue uniform type. He preceded me back to Washington and his assignment was in the Pentagon with the Air Attaché Branch. He tipped me off to a position opening in the Warsaw Pact area. I said, "Which one is it?" He said, "Well, it is Poland and with your name there should be no trouble for you to be selected." I applied and was accepted and selected. The Air Force made an incorrect assumption that I was fluent in Polish. Dad spoke five languages, but mother was from Roanoke, assigned in Oklahoma I learned a few words of Comanche, but never would he speak Polish. I think in the '20s perhaps, I remember him and others saying that if you spoke a foreign language you were suspect. That was two or three of the reasons that he didn't speak the language.

I was brought into the Air Force intelligence, into the attaché-designate training branch and started a three or six month schooling. About a three-month schooling in Washington and Wright Pat Airfield for technical and photography. Then I went to FSI (Foreign Service Institute of the State Department) where I had a 9-month intensive Polish language training course. I was the only student in the class, which was a comfort in sort of a way. It meant that it was a little more difficult because I was the only person to answer the questions. I asked if my wife could join me and they agreed. My wife had wanted the training but she hadn't been invited yet. It helped when she could join me at the blackboard, in the recitation, etc. This went on for nine months. It was a very good course. I did have two teachers over the nine-month period. When I finished I had a very good vocabulary. I could write it all right. My grammar was not very good, but I could put 12 words together and get the idea across. My hearing was all right, but I was very slow to understand fully what was said. It came slowly.

After the language course, we went on our way in February, 1958 to the Embassy in Warsaw. We had the good fortune of going on the SS United States. My other military colleagues either flew in a military transport, plane or something. I arrived at the Embassy and reported to Ambassador Jacob Beam, who was a very dear friend. One of the State Department's outstanding senior diplomats. You know I am sure, but I would just like to say that I served for him for two and a half years during the Gomulka days. He later was posted to Czechoslovakia and Czechoslovakia became sort of a stepping stone for career Foreign Service officers to go to Moscow. Jake Beam was the first, Malcolm Toon was the second and Jack Matlock was the third to get to Moscow via Czechoslovakia, the post that I ultimately was assigned to.

Two and a half years in Warsaw during the Gomulka period and the shooting down of the U-2. Those two things gave us some pretty difficult dealings.

Q: First, I wonder if you could explain how we in the Embassy saw the situation in Poland at the time you were there? Poland has obviously changed considerably in the last couple of years, but it was the center of the Warsaw Pact. How did we see both the people of Poland, the government and the military?

NIEMCZYK: Unlike my assignment as Ambassador to Czechoslovakia which we will talk about later, as a representative of the United States military armed forces, I was the Air Attaché, it was impossible. I had no opportunity to meet with the local civilian Polish population. It would have put them at risk if I had even attempted to do so...to have any contact with the military. Now they could meet our USIA people and some of our consular officers and some of our officers had the mission of making contacts with Polish civilians. I could not do that mainly because it would put them at risk.

But here we would see the Soviets in charge of almost everything. The Doyen of the Attaché Corps was the Soviet Military Attaché. Clearly the Warsaw Pact Attachés had the upper hand in whatever we were doing. Whether it was a seat in a row for a concert, a cultural event, or whether it was who was in the first position if we were out on a hunting trip, or a seating arrangement at an Attaché function. They, the Warsaw Pact and Soviet people had been their longer so were higher on the list of our diplomatic corps. I don't remember ever a Western attaché becoming the Doyen of this group.

The poor people of Poland had a very difficult life then, as they have had the last 40-45 years. Warsaw, today, and I have been there earlier this year, but other friends have been posted in the last two to six years and tell me that life is considerably better over those who had a previous assignment 15 or 20 years ago. But it is a very, unfortunate, difficult, country for the people who must live there. They are proud people. They have a great history. They are in a geographical location, as you know, with no real boundaries...people from the East going west and people from the West going east, people from the South going northward. It has been centuries of a difficult life.

I had two and a half years there. The U-2 incident when Eisenhower was President created quite a stir and difficult times. It caused Eisenhower to cancel a summit meeting, as I recollect. Here, again, we the Westerners, particularly we from the United States, were the culprits when Gary Powers was shot down and captured. That was a period that I remember vividly. We did not humble ourselves or stay out of the corridors, but it was made very difficult for us.

Q: Here we were in the middle of a cold war and certainly it was not a comfortable time. What would an American military attaché be able to do in Poland?

NIEMCZYK: We had the good fortune of having a very close knit collegial arrangement with the Canadians and the British and to a lesser extent with the French and the Italians. Because we were short staffed, unlike Bonn, London, Paris and Rome, we had to work together. We were under surveillance all the time, except for when we could slip away or lose them on a trip. We would get together in our bubble rooms and talk about an upcoming trip...I with the Canadian, I with the British, my wife and I, any combination.

We would plan on a Tuesday morning to leave the house and pick up our colleague at 6 in the morning. We would have one or two, or sometimes three days of food packed,

starting out with ice which would melt away, but other food would last. Sometimes we would have a tent with us if it was in the summer. Poland is never good, even in the summer, for camping out, although the native Poles do it. We would get out of Warsaw.

First we had tasks from our respective government departments...what they wanted us to check on. We tried to split the country into different sectors and hit them over a period of 12 months. We would drive by, for the most part, military installations that we knew was a tank outfit or an artillery outfit. We would drive by airfields where we knew the Polish Air Force was or the Soviet Air Force. We would go by what became missile locations and very sensitive.

We were always concerned about being arrested or getting involved in something that would cause us being PNGed, expelled, persona non grata. We have had a number of instances when people who for one reason or another were expelled. I was sent over there for a purpose and I didn't want to be expelled before my tour was up, so I abided pretty carefully with the regulations. But at the same time we took a few risks.

I mentioned earlier on that we went out to Dayton to the Air Force Technical Institute where we had a two-week photography course. We would take photographs of radar aircraft, trying to get a number. Sometimes we would spend an hour miles beyond the end of an airfield on a training day, if we were lucky enough to hit a training day, noting that they had so many planes taking off every so many minutes, and the type of aircraft. Sometimes we would spend overnight when we learned through other sources that it was possible that a shipment of SAM-2s (Sam Two Missiles)...

Q: These would be anti-aircraft surface to air missiles.

NIEMCZYK: ...were coming from the Soviet Union and transiting Poland into East Germany. This was just the beginning in the late '50s of supplying East Germany. We wanted to get something where we really had evidence that this was taking place. They would not do it by trucks on highways. They did it by rail and bypassed the major centers and cities.

One night, myself and the sergeant in my office, with whom I traveled occasionally, took a tent and a bed roll and went into the woods near a rail line just about half a kilometer from the Oder-Neisse River, which was the boundary between East Germany and Poland. We positioned ourselves well and pitched our tent about fifty yards from the elevated railroad track...we were down at a lower level, but in an area where we could get up and run quickly if we had to to get closer to the track. We arrived there late afternoon and had no surveillance this time, managing to lose them by maneuvering and driving in a variety of ways to get rid of not one but two surveillance automobiles.

About 7 o'clock it got dark. We had our meal that we had brought and chatted and listened for trains. When one came by we would go out and look, but it was nothing of importance. Beginning at 11 o'clock we would take shifts of an hour or two where one of

us would be awake and the other asleep. Lo and behold, about 1 o'clock on a moon lit night, we heard a train coming. Both of us awoke so we could verify the event. We went up and here was a 20 or 30 flat car train just loaded with SAM-2s with the trucks that would transport these things. The trucks, we learned by studying charts and graphs, were easily identifiable because you had the hood and the cab and behind the cab was this big cylinder gadget that hooked onto the trailer with the missile. We couldn't take photographs but we saw it and gave the count number, and identified them as such.

We made one of the first reports of seeing these things transiting Poland into East Germany. We thought we had a coup and we did indeed. We got some accolades in the cables both from the Department of Defense and the Agency.

Q: With this type of thing, how did you find, because you were later to be in a different position of being the ambassador, the work of the attachés fit into the work of the Embassy in those days?

NIEMCZYK: Well, looking back on it, 1958-60, even my recollection of the office in the Philippines, the military was not brought into the Embassy operation as much as later on when I was the Defense Attaché in Prague and even today.

Q: The country team aspect hadn't really been developed.

NIEMCZYK: The country team aspect hadn't been developed. The Ambassador would hold staff meetings and we were seldom to never included. Social events, Marine Birthday Ball, and other Embassy parties, we, of course, were in there. I would report to the Ambassador the trips, problems, personnel, etc., but it was a little distant at the time. But as you say, the country team had not been initiated at that time in Poland, so we just went on about our business with the other NATO attachés. My wife, however, did participate with the Embassy wives on occasions when Mrs. Beam needed them. Unlike today when you can't tell these wives, many of them are working at the Embassy, to do certain things as you did then.

One of the highlights careerwise was the story I just related, identifying the SAM-2 missiles. But there were two other highlights where I did play an active, and what I consider, an important part, as an Embassy personnel. Mr. Nixon, as Vice President, visited Poland during the time I was there. The Ambassador, Jake Beam, had his wife at the airport, the DCM and his wife, and asked me and my wife to be at the airport, and I suppose there were others like the Admin Officer to take care of the baggage, etc. We went out and greeted Mr. Nixon when he came in. He and Ambassador Beam were together on official visits with the Communist hierarchy and the leaders. There was one important event that I was asked to participate in as was the Army Attaché, and that was the wreath laying ceremony at the Polish Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. On Nixon's team was Admiral Hyman Rickover, Milton Eisenhower, and somebody else. There was a lot of photographic coverage with this. Of course, the Army Attaché, Colonel McCutchen, who was killed in Vietnam and we see his wife frequently now...she has since remarried

but she is down at the Marriott Retirement Home at Ft. Belvoir, which you may have read or heard about. Her husband and I carried the wreath, following the Vice President and his entourage and a lot of Polish officials and generals followed us. We carried the wreath up to the tomb, the flame...Have you ever been to Warsaw to see...

Q: No, I haven't.

NIEMCZYK: The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is an open air sort of thing that is twice the size of your room, perhaps, but before World War II it had large pillars that went up 10, 15 feet into the air. But they were shelled so there were just stubs then about 2, 3 feet and jagged. They have left that there for effect. Anyway, there was a lot of photographic coverage and I got four main photographs. One with Vice President Nixon greeting some women and children handing him some flowers and the two attachés were standing there. Then there was a shot taken from behind the flame with the wreath, the Vice President, the Polish general saluting with his two-finger salute, and Colonel McCutchen and I saluting and other people behind. Here we were with the Vice President in the center, the Army fellow to the right rear and I to the left rear. Later in the years I had these four photographs put together and framed, typed up what was happening and then photographed it. The picture with Nixon I managed to get him to sign. He wrote "With best wishes for a successful career in the future years." I will get to that story somewhat later.

Another experience where we were asked to take part in the Embassy, and this will be the last. I am trying to answer your question on relationships. A CODEL (Congressional Delegation) of about six or eight came into Warsaw for two nights and three days. There were two or three Senators and two or three Representatives. In those days, and from some of the reports I get from Prague and elsewhere, we are going back to those days of frugal, budgetary considerations...I had my own representation funds and my wife and I managed with them somehow. But the Ambassador also had representation funds, but he had to spread himself pretty thin, I suppose, with all the things he did, which I learned later in life an ambassador had to do. He asked the DCM and for some reason my wife and I...I don't know why he didn't ask the Army guy. I was a Lt. Colonel and the Army guy was a Bird Colonel. Maybe he was out of the country, I don't remember. But he asked the DCM and myself to split up this group. I guess his Residence there seated 14 people or something like that unless you went to a buffet and ate off your lap or a card table thing. He asked us if we would break up this group of six or eight, and all came with wives, and we did. And there was some planning on this split up. I said that I was from Oklahoma and I got Senator Mike Monroney, who is now deceased, but he was the Senator from Oklahoma. I got Congressman Ed Derwinski, who was Polish heritage from Illinois. And we had a Congressman and one of the military staff, a Bird Colonel, who I happened to know in the Air Force Intelligence. We had an Embassy person from the economic section, or somewhere, which made up a dinner party of 10 or 12. So we felt more a part of the Embassy and we appreciated that. It worked out very nicely.

Those are three or four of the recollections. But I have to stress and emphasize the difficulty of working in a then Warsaw Pact country. You are under surveillance all the time. Your phone as well as your residence was bugged. It was very difficult circumstances. The males expected it, the spouses were subjected to it. It was a tough life.

Q: You came back. What happened between the time you left Warsaw and went to Prague as Military Attaché?

NIEMCZYK: I was in Warsaw from February, 1958 until July, 1960. Then I returned to the US. I had already set a pattern of assignments in intelligence and a Departmental transfer. So I was assigned to the Air Force Systems Command Headquarters in Kelly Field in Texas. That command has listening posts all over the world.

Q: Was this Air Force Security Service?

NIEMCZYK: Yes.

Q: I am an alumnus of the Air Force Security Service.

NIEMCZYK: Are you really?

Q: During the Korean War they grabbed me and I ended up as an airman first class after four years. I went to the Army language school and look Russian. I was in the 69 something or other or the different RSMs around, both in Korea, Japan and Germany.

NIEMCZYK: Very interesting. True, it was the Air Force Systems Command. But, here again, a unique experience of my military career, if you will. I was assigned to the National Security Agency for four years. In my military career I logged four years with CIA, returned to Ft. Meade and was at their headquarters for 2 years at NSA where I was promoted to full colonel. I spent two years at the headquarters at a time when NSA realized they needed closer relationship with the JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff), and DIA (Defense Intelligence Agency) had been formed. Lo and behold my friend and colleague, General Joe Carol, who organized the OSI, had become director of the DIA as a three star General. NSA knew that I had a relationship with General Joe Carol and said, "Say, Jay, we know you are living in quarters here on the post, but we are going to set up this NSA Liaison Office with the JCS, the DIA and whatever we can work into, but it is going to mean an office in the Pentagon. Are you interested?" I said that I was not looking forward to giving up these quarters, but I would take it. So my wife and I relocated into quarters just off of Lorcom Lane and that part of Virginia so I didn't have as far a drive to the Pentagon as I had in later years.

I opened this office and went to Joe Carol. I had been in the military 22 years and had developed a number of friendly colleagues, the main one being Joe Carol. His staff set us up, NSA up, with a suite of offices that were down the hall from Joe Carol's. There was just myself and a secretary at the time. But I went to work and was in meetings organized

by me or others involving the senior NSA people with the JCS and with DIA. And at that time it was developing a lot of...I am not a communication expert, but I was the liaison and the representative and I would set up high level meetings and they would talk about the listening devices, whether it was in Iraq or Iran, or then in Ethiopia, which it no longer is ...

Q: Kagnew Station which sort of predicated our entire policy in the Horn of Africa for years, even after it had become somewhat outmoded.

NIEMCZYK: Well, you know the types of things that I would be involved in than. NSA was having trouble getting real estate, getting support...Army, Navy and Air, depending on where the facilities were located. And the satellites became into being and we got into high level briefings on that and I would be the go between to set them up. I had a knack for getting along with people and negotiating and transacting business and developed the necessary contacts for NSA.

I completed two years in the Pentagon, my third or fourth assignment in the Pentagon at this point. And I am up to 1966, I guess. I went to Prague in February/March, 1967.

Q: Did you go to language training?

NIEMCZYK: Yes, but I have a few stories to tell in between. As my four year tour with NSA was ending, the Air Force Systems Command, and I was a full colonel, said, "Look, if you have any aspirations of ever being a general [which I did] you should have a command. We are going to try to come up with a command assignment for you." You are aware, and if not I will state, that in the armed forces, in past years, one attaché assignment with an Embassy was about par for the course or the only expectation that you could count on. And it was in the best interest of the individual because this was not the way to become a general. I was not a pilot, having joined the Air Force, I had established myself in the intelligence field. So the Air Force Security Service, and my friends and colleagues both at NSA, some civilian, some military, said I had to have a command. To make that story come to an end, I received orders to be the commanding officer at the Iraklion Air Base in Crete. Well, my wife and I were delighted.

Q: A beautiful place.

NIEMCZYK: I thrive in the heat and in the middle of the Mediterranean...my wife is Irish and is allergic to sunshine but she went along with it as a trooper, you know. We really looked forward to Crete. I knew I was going, had orders in my hand, and was being briefed. I was studying up on Greece and Iraklion, and talked to people who had been there previously. I learned that the commander lived in two connecting trailers, that was the only shortcoming in my mind. There was an airplane there to go to Greece for commissaries and supplies, to meet with the Ambassadors and the Armed Forces hierarchy and do the service for the Air Force Systems Security Command and NSA and

the whole ball of wax. I think I did a little bit of training or surely studying for that. I am a little vague on how to fill in this time that I am about to get to.

The Air Force and I received word from the State Department that the Defense Attaché, who was an Air Force colonel, died suddenly in the courtyard of the American Embassy in Prague from a massive heart attack. Ambassador Jake Beam had asked for Colonel Niemczyk by name if he was available to come to Prague as the Defense Attaché, having served with him in Warsaw eight or nine years earlier. He knew me, I knew him, we worked together in the subordinate/superior status. His wife and my wife had a very congenial Embassy working arrangement. They knew each other. Well, they put the decision up to me. My wife and I really kicked this one around a long, long time. I looked at it two ways. One, that if he wanted me I would be honored, I guess. I hated to see this command float away. But also, if he really wanted it, he probably could have gotten me anyway. So I said yes. Well that took me out of the command situation, but as you now know, it was an alls-well-that-ends-well story, because it was important going there for two and a half years, '67,'68,'69, was a contributing factor to the selection still years later for the appointment as Ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

Q: Absolutely crucial time in our relations. What happened in Czechoslovakia still is one of those key points.

NIEMCZYK: I didn't know that. Tea leaves or crystal ball were not there. But, again, we gave up Crete with mixed feelings but had good feelings about rejoining a career Foreign Service officer with whom we had served before.

We arrived, February/March, 1967, not knowing what was going to happen. We watched the calendar year 1967 pass with a lot of happenings in the political arena.

Q: To set this up, when you arrived there could you give an account of where Czechoslovakia was as we saw it at that time?

NIEMCZYK: My recollection was that Czechoslovakia was still low priority on the State Department's list. I may sound contradictory here, but Jake Beam, having been sent there, somebody, it may have been a condition for preparing Jake Beam for an ultimate assignment to Moscow, or it may have been that somebody was seeing things that others were not seeing with respect to the geographic, geopolitical stance of Czechoslovakia in this Warsaw Pact location, jutting into Central Western Europe as it was. Later having been CEO of a private sector organization called People-to-People International, I found it unbelievable that so many Americans did not realize that Prague was more westerly than Vienna, Austria. So back to your question, forward looking people in our government may have seen more importance than I did at the time. We knew, however, that it was fully taken over by Soviet Communists. The country probably was a little better off than Poland to the north in terms of commodities, livelihood and things of that sort. But things were getting tougher and tougher.

But along came a ray of light in early '68 with the Prague Spring and with what Dubcek was trying to do. From there on, the first nine, ten or eleven months had been a totally different, difficult grim period and the Prague Spring and Dubcek brought a totally different light for the people on the street. Once again though, like in Warsaw, as military, although I was in a position where I was out traveling around, looking for missiles and airplanes, for the same reasons I mentioned in Warsaw I could not, did not pursue relationships with Czechs and Slovaks.

Q: How did we view the Czech military? Obviously we are always evaluating the fact that we could have a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. My recollection was that the Czechs at least were certainly on the intelligent side considered to be along with the East Germans, the number one operators in the intelligence field for the Soviets. So from your perspective at that time how did we view the Czech military?

NIEMCZYK: They were viewed as high caliber, very capable in everything they did at that time. And they had the Russians standing right behind them. A good air force and army. But there was always a feeling that if the balloon ever went up they would not support the Soviets too strongly, even that far back. But on display and participating as a Warsaw Pact nation, they were out in front doing their job until the Prague Spring and things that happened to their leaders, Dubcek, particularly. The people in the military had families and relatives who were out there trying to make a livelihood and live a long life. The military, like their STB, the secret police, was brought into this orbit of Moscow Russian domain and had to do their thing for a livelihood. But the Prague Spring brought about tremendous change.

Q: Could you explain what the Prague Spring, from our point of view, meant?

NIEMCZYK: It meant a bright future for the 15 million Czechs and Slovaks. A move from hard-line Communist control to a little more freedom. A little more democratic way of life, perhaps. And a lot of hope. For the first time you would see a few smiles on the faces of the people in the street. You didn't see that before. We would travel in Slovakia, Bohemia and Moravia, the Western Czech Lands, and would see...I am a Catholic and my wife and I made it a point to go to a different church every Sunday. Sometimes we would end up going back to some of them because of the beauty of the church, or perhaps an excellent choral group. Sometimes there was a small symphony at times with brass, reeds, violins. That would bring the people even though in the winter it was stone cold. So you had the Catholic church there and the sermons by the priests going a little bit beyond where they were going in the past. Then the treatment of Dubcek by the leaders in the Soviet Union.

You asked me earlier what the military attachés did in Poland. Here in Czechoslovakia there were so many, what we would call false alarms. There would be rumors of invasion starting about May, 1968 and the invasion wasn't until August. But there were rumors of invasion. There had been overflights of planes.

Q: This was Soviet pressure on the liberalization of the Dubcek regime?

NIEMCZYK: That is correct. Now recalling that Czechoslovakia was part of the Warsaw Pact to have these things happen on their border also contributed to the concern of the Czechs and the Slovaks. For example, we would hear either from DIA or the State Department that the Poles were gathering on the border north of Ostrava, or some place like that. Or we would hear that the East Germans were moving in the direction of the border. This was after Dubcek had started his move toward liberalization. So we would go out and go up toward the borders or down toward Hungary and would check these things out. Sometimes they would be false alarms.

Then the Soviets undertook the tactic of holding a field exercise in Czechoslovakia. They would bring in elements of Polish military and East Germans. They would stay for seven days and learn the roads, towns, the villages, etc. The attachés would go out and try to see the forces and the markings on the vehicles and things of that sort, and report back and verify.

Then, a week or two later, there would be another report of Soviets coming in through Slovakia and an element of Hungarians coming up across the border. Lo and behold that would happen. Field exercise, the announcement would be made by the Soviet Warsaw Pact element. And the Czechoslovak officials, and we are going to the military now...the officials particularly but the military became disenchanted, if not annoyed and disappointed.

Q: Incidentally, was the Czechoslovak military fully made members of the greater Soviet bloc or did they have their own personal feelings that you were able to gather towards the Poles, and particularly towards the East Germans?

NIEMCZYK: Up until January, February, March of 1968, they were prepared to do their part with the Warsaw Pact. But with the things that they would see and their uncles, their parents and grandparents if they were in the military, and all of the lies that were told in the school about the history, so many things came about to cause them, the military, to be somewhat skeptical. The treatment surely of their leaders. But all of these invasions, temporary "field exercises," caused them to be disenchanted beyond that.

But, throughout all these periods of the field exercises they would come in to learn the highways, the towns, the routes, etc. It really kept us, the NATO attachés, on the road running these things down. I am sure it kept the communication system people picking up whatever they picked up from tank commanders and aircraft in the air and things of that sort.

And then came the invasion, late at night, starting about 9 or 10 o'clock on August 20. We could hear all this noise in the air.

Let me go back and say that there were rumors and rumors of invasions and I guess at this point a lot of people expected it but no one could predict it, not even the CIA, or NSA, or the attachés in East Germany at the Military Liaison Mission, Poland, Hungary, etc.

Q: Something like this at a certain point requires someone to say, "Do it." And that is the hardest thing in the world to predict.

NIEMCZYK: So we heard this heavy armada of aircraft which went into the International Airfield which was closed down, bringing in soldiers, paratroopers. Tanks started rolling in after midnight and they arrived in Prague at 5 in the morning from East Germany and Poland. They were in Bratislava at midnight and we were having phone calls to our Embassy from Slovaks in Bratislava. We had a consulate, but it was closed. I was instrumental in getting it open twenty years later.

Q: Senator Pell opened the place as a young vice consul.

NIEMCZYK: So we had these calls from Bratislava saying that Soviet and Hungarian forces had crossed the river in Bratislava and were heading wherever. So early next morning, we went to the Embassy and spent a lot of the night there. I went to my home the next day. My home as Defense Attaché was on a street called Na Zatorce and at the end of the street was the Soviet Embassy compound, which was huge. About a block up the street was the residence of the Soviet Ambassador. When I got home in the morning, the Soviet Ambassador's residence had been surrounded by tanks. My little quiet street of Na Zatorce had tanks and armored cars backed up over the curb tearing up the sidewalk. My driveway was closed connecting a circle around the Soviet Embassy. So it was quite a fortification there with my place being right in the middle.

The Czechoslovak underground went to work in a hurry with radios and printing out various posters that were posted on downtown columns and doors. I managed to get one which is in my den room right now. The Underground would put them up at night and the Soviet soldiers would take them down in the morning. They were posters using symbols of traffic signs. One would say, "Watch out for children." One had "No entry." One had "Tanks" with a red line. Then at the bottom in Cyrillic they had Moscow, Sofia, Warsaw, Dresden and Budapest. These were printed and I managed to get one of these and frame it.

You know the story of the Romanians not participating, but out of that story comes a story for us, the military. This Romanian military attaché all of a sudden started talking to us in the gardens over in the corner giving us his impressions as did the Yugoslav about the invasion.

It would have been unrealistic, suicidal sort of thing for the Czechoslovak armed forces to try to do anything against massive Warsaw Pact invasion. The Czechs and the Poles, although Slavs, have never been very close. The Czechs and Slovaks were hurt and upset about this invasion but were really hurt about their Polish brethren participating. If

Romania could choose not to participate, why didn't you, the Poles, decline to participate. There were many stories along those lines.

In 48 hours, Ambassador Beam had permitted the newspaper people who were down at the various hotels, including a friend of mine Tad Schultz, into the Embassy. They slept on couches, cots, sleeping bags, etc. Not knowing whether this would be another Budapest, Jake Beam, decided to evacuate dependents and children. All the officers' wives, except his, the DCM, the Army attaché's and mine were to leave. He asked me to form a 100 car convoy... 50 to Nürnberg and 50 to Vienna...to take them out of the country for fear that this would be another Budapest. It took 11 or 12 days to determine this.

In these cars we put Canadians, British, Americans and some civilians who were caught in this. One of whom was Shirley Temple Black who was there on some sort of a mission hoping to see Dubcek the morning of the 21st.

Q: For the record, Shirley Temple Black is presently Ambassador to Czechoslovakia.

NIEMCZYK: She was my successor. We became friends then. I got to know her even more at the Department of State's Ambassador-designate seminar when she was one of three former Ambassadors who participated in it.

There was a reception at the DCM's home for her. There was a reception at the Ambassador's residence, which is magnificent and very representational. Word has it that out of the 140 or so Embassies worldwide, there are 6 that are State Department's prime, prime property for Ambassadors. That is one of them. London, the Winfield House; Paris; Rome, maybe; Prague surely. So Shirley had a chance to look that over 20 years early. She has written about being there during the invasion. She was evacuated with this group.

Twelve or 14 days later it became apparent...there were something like a 100 people killed, that is 100 too many, but not thousands and not like the Hungarian uprising. There was no uprising, there was no opposition.

Like in 1948, that caused a lot of Czechs and Slovaks to leave and go elsewhere like the United States or London. The Soviets came in with all these other Warsaw Pact countries. They stayed about 60 days. The East Germans, Poles, Hungarians and Bulgarians then slowly withdrew. The Soviets left 60,000 and set up encampments, kicking out Czechoslovaks from various barracks taking them over. The Czechoslovaks were relocated. That created a problem and an aggravation on the part of the Czechoslovak military, naturally.

Husak became President; Jakes, a terrible man, replaced Dubcek; Bielak became Chairman of the Communist Party. Bielak was anti-American, although his father left Czechoslovakia and went to Chicago with Bielak as a child. Then his father returned to Czechoslovakia.

Dubcek's situation continued to deteriorate until they ousted him. For a while he was with the Forestry Ministry and then I think they made him Ambassador to Turkey or some place for a year. Then he came back and was exiled in his own country in terms of any position. He was just another citizen waiting it out.

So 1968 was a very bleak year. The apex of hope went high through March, April, May; things started to come up causing concern in May, June and July; the invasion in August; and then September brought grim and back to the old attitude with people on the streets unhappy. 1969 came and there was just more of the same. I left in July, 1969.

Q: Did you find that the Czech military had changed? After this trauma I would have thought that the Czech military would have been more approachable?

NIEMCZYK: They were and they became even more approachable for a period of time.

Q: Was the feeling within our military at that time that the Warsaw Pact had solved an immediate problem but had caused a much greater one for later on as far as unity of the Pact was concerned?

NIEMCZYK: Clearly that was the case the seven to ten months after the invasion that I was there. You just had the feeling as you would see the leaders at receptions, or something. We started getting more invitations. Czech and Slovak military started accepting our invitations, more so than they did before the invasion. You could feel clearly a change. They would talk with us a little bit more about the dreadful case of the Poles agreeing when the Romanians didn't. Then I left. I guess there was another tightening up during the 18 or 20 years that I was away, which I can pick up another time.

Q: Okay. Maybe we ought to call it quits at this point. I would like to talk a bit about atmosphere at the Embassy and relations, etc. the next time, before we move to the next phase.

NIEMCZYK: Something I should tell you in closing. The American Embassy is in a 300 year-old palace.

Q: What is the name of the palace?

NIEMCZYK: The Schönbrunn Palace. It has a front with four wings to it. When I was there as a military attaché, we had about 14 families living in apartments. Now there are only 7 and there is another story there. Behind the Embassy and property owned by the United States, is a three-tiered garden, the top of which is something called the Gloriette. It is an open structure made of brick with a red tile ceiling. Jake Beam decided he would put a flag mast there. It is high on the Petrin Hill range. He put a flag pole up about the fourth day of the invasion and hoisted the American flag. We had one in front of the Embassy, but this flag could be seen from the Hradcany Castle and all over this area of

Mala Strana where our Embassy was located. We were never told to take it down, it is flying today. It is put up by the Marines in the morning and taken down at night. That flag flew throughout the Soviet occupation.

Q: Very good. Let's stop now.

Q: Today is April 21, 1992. This is a continuing interview with Ambassador Niemczyk. Mr. Ambassador, what was it like working and living in Prague during the time you were there as Defense Attaché?

NIEMCZYK: Naturally it was much more difficult than later when I was Ambassador. My daily life was encountered by and encumbered with constant surveillance by the Czechoslovak secret police, the STB. They were watching my home, they were checking me as I left the Embassy compound. During our travels with the NATO attachés, particularly the British and the Canadian, in spite of our efforts to get up early in the morning and leave before daybreak, we would always have two or three cars in surveillance. Periodically throughout the trip we could lose them, only to be picked up some time later when we went through minor or a major city. The gear that we took on these trips always included bedrolls and tent so if we did lose them, rather than checking into a hotel, which was much more comfortable, we would sleep in the woods, without surveillance, and then go about our business.

Our home life was very good. Our home was on a street where there were four or five ambassadors which was pleasant. It enabled me to get in touch with those ambassadors of various countries. Living was quite satisfactory. At time pleasant, short of the listening devices which we knew were always present. Commodities were satisfactory. I am talking about food stuffs. We seldom bought clothing there, rather making periodical trips to West Germany to a PX for such items. My wife and I registered pleasantness, sadness, apprehension, improving circumstances and then total collapse with Prague Spring with what Dubcek was trying to do, and then ultimately with the Soviet Warsaw Pact invasion everything fell apart and that was when we shared the sadness and unhappiness of the Czechoslovak people.

Q: A final thing on your period as Defense Attaché in Prague, after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, what was the NATO military impression of how it was done, how it was managed as a military operation?

NIEMCZYK: Highly successful. Very well conducted. But you have to keep in mind that in the months of March, April, May, June and even July, we would observe, read in the paper or hear on the radio, that there would be an exercise on the 15th of April and would last three or seven days and would involve East German troops. So the East German troops would cross the border and set up their CPXs and do their thing and in a week or so leave. Then a month or three weeks later a group of Poles would be joined by Soviet forces on an exercise in Czechoslovakia...I could cite six or seven of these exercises which were all false alarms toward invasions. We were running around every time we

would hear of an exercise and trying to check it out. The Hungarians from the south had an exercise.

This permitted all of these Warsaw Pact forces that did participate to learn the highways, the major routes, some of the towns, etc. When the balloon went up, a lot of people had reason to believe it was coming, but no one knew when. The satellites were picking up all the military grouping along the borders. We were reporting on what was going on inside Czechoslovakia. The service attachés in other Warsaw Pact countries were doing the same. And then it happened. I will never forget. I got a nasty cable some days after the invasion from the Defense Department, DIA, saying, "Look, you are reporting now what has happened and it is very good, but why didn't you tell us a little bit more about this?" I fired back a cable saying, "Look, I am here in the invaded country. Why don't you ask this question of my counterparts in Poland and Hungary and US Military Liaison Mission in Potsdam the question? They were the ones that should have been out in their cars, as I was, looking at the posture of these forces that were about to crank up their engines and move."

Q: You never win in one of those.

NIEMCZYK: No, I never really won, but I was able to reply.

Q: In your thinking, and in the military thinking, did this speak for how there might be an attack on West Germany, for example, and NATO, or were the circumstances such that this really wasn't a good exercise to see how they might launch an attack against the West?

NIEMCZYK: I said that they pulled it off in a very organized fashion. It went very well, but they had many dry runs to do it through these exercises. Of course, when they did it there was absolutely no resistance by the Czechoslovak armed forces. So to answer your question, I don't think they would have been as successful and had as easy an operation against elements in West Germany because there would be response by the NATO forces in West Germany. So I don't think anyone could use the invasion of Czechoslovakia as a measure as to what the outcome or the prospects might have been had they at some point during this critical Cold War period been an invasion across the borders into West Germany.

Q: When did you leave Prague?

NIEMCZYK: I left Prague in August, 1969, so I witnessed a year of this somber period following the invasion. I returned to Washington, DC.

Q: You stayed in the Air Force?

NIEMCZYK: I stayed in the Air Force, but was assigned, fortunately, to the ISA (International Security Affairs) of OSD in the Pentagon. I was assigned as chief of the

Eastern Europe section. I worked then with Warren Nooter, who was Assistant Secretary for ISA, and many others. It was an interesting period, coming back from Czechoslovakia to be in that position.

Q: At that time what was the impression of the loyalty effectiveness of various East European military forces within the Warsaw Pact?

NIEMCZYK: It was difficult for us to judge the effectiveness. They did what they were supposed to do. Those with the Soviet forces that were brought in across the border at the Eastern tip of Czechoslovakia were a mixed bag of ethnic groups, including some Asians. They didn't really know where they were.

Q: I am talking more about Eastern Europe after the Czech business. How did you think they would measure up against NATO?

NIEMCZYK: In my personal opinion, I feel that they would have been no match against NATO in their hearts, if I can use that expression, and their minds. They had the equipment, loads of equipment, but the Czechs who were for years pro-American and pro-Western, even in the armed forces, were not overly enthused about going to war with the Western world with the United States a part of it. The Poles were never really deeply involved with the Warsaw Pact concept. The East Germans, yes. The Hungarians would be questionable as to whether they would go in with much enthusiasm. The Romanians and the Bulgarians were too far geographically out of range to really be counted on too much. I am realizing airdrop and airlift possibilities. But I think they would be no match for the NATO forces had it come to pass.

Q: Moving on because we are concentrating on your foreign affairs side. Just one last thing about ISA. I remember one time I was doing an inspection for the State Department and I had to talk to some State Department over in ISA. I had never paid much attention to this and was amazed going over there and finding a whole bloody State Department with desk officers sitting around there. It came as a surprise and shock and sort of a question too. You know when you have what amounts to competing institutions this can cause problems. How were the relations with the State Department, the East European part of the European Bureau, with your section in ISA?

NIEMCZYK: Very good. I considered my assignment with ISA certainly a part of my career that assisted me considerably in ultimately getting appointed as Ambassador, just as I did the Defense Attaché position in Czechoslovakia during the invasion.

When I appeared at ISA...as I said Mr. Nooter was Assistant Secretary, my boss; a Deputy Assistant Secretary was a Navy admiral. Under him were military and civilians, for the most part from the State Department, although there were some Defense people who maintained the continuity. One man was Reg Bartholomew, who became a dear friend of mine. You know his reputation and accomplishments as the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon and Spain and now Under Secretary. Reg and I have appeared before the Senate Foreign

Affairs committee the same day, the same time. He got to speak first... knowing Reg and his ability in dealing with these people he went first and I picked up a few pointers from him.

I served under this admiral for a year and then Larry Eagleburger came in as the Deputy Assistant Secretary and he was my boss.

I got to know those two very well and we have been in touch over those subsequent 20 years or so. So I would have to say that what I saw there was a favorable operating circumstances with the people who were brought in from the State Department with the military and the civilians who were not State Department.

Q: When did you leave the Air Force?

NIEMCZYK: I left in October, 1971. That gave me two years and four months in ISA.

Q: Then what did you do?

NIEMCZYK: I put out a couple hundred resumes and the things that I wanted I would get letters saying I was overqualified. The things that were offered I wasn't interested in. I just bided my time until the Fall of 1972 and Clark McGregor, who was a Congressman from Minnesota and with whom I had served in the OSS during WWII, passed my name to the Re-elect the President Committee. I got a phone call from the RNC and asked if I would like to come in and volunteer. I am 51 years old. I said, "Okay, I want to get involved." So I went down to the Republican National Committee and with my name I got in through something called the Nationality Heritage Groups...the Greeks, the Poles, the Italians, etc.

I volunteered for two or three months and went out on the road for Dick Lugar, whom I mentioned earlier. I found myself in Indianapolis out at factories at the gates by which the shifts left, passing out literature for Dick Lugar who was running for Senate then. He had been Mayor of Indianapolis.

Then I would come back to the headquarters and stuff envelopes and all sorts of things. Nixon won the election and here people were angling for some kind of rewards. All I was doing was sitting there waiting to see what would be left after all of the rewards were given out.

The person whom I ultimately succeeded had been director of the Heritage Division with the RNC, which Bob Dole was the head of at the time and then he gave it up. Nixon tapped George Bush, who was happy as the Ambassador to the UN with a furnished flat up there, to come and be chairman of the RNC. I was still roaming around and sort of taking over some of the things that had to be done. The director was rewarded with a GS-15 at EPA, leaving the job open. Bush saw me and got to know me. At this point I was a little older than some of the people down there...it was about 60 percent 18 through 30

and 40 percent 40 through 60. So Bush asked me if I would be interested in joining his staff. I was honored and accepted. That was the start of my domestic politics.

I remained at the RNC for eight years as director of the Heritage Group through Bush, Mary Louise Smith, and finally, former Senator Bill Brock, who was outstanding.

Q: What was the role as you saw it of ethnic politics? There is the Israeli lobby as well as the Greek lobby in dealing with Cyprus and Turkey. Did you find through your position a reflection of various ethnic groups coming in saying they would support you if you supported Slovakian independence, etc.?

NIEMCZYK: There was a lot of that. My predecessor was prone to get very emotional and very involved in things like that. I was a different sort then this fellow who was Hungarian. He had been born in Hungary, had immigrated and became a good US citizen, working at the RNC and, as I said, rewarded. I had been born and raised in Oklahoma. My father was in the military and I got in the military and wasn't brought up in Chicago, Cleveland, etc. So I didn't have these attachments that he and others did. I would have these people come in. The Armenian talking about the Turkish situation. The Slovaks wanting independence. The Greek and Cyprus. I would listen and say, "Well we will see." But when we would have our every second year convention of the National Republic Heritage Group Council where officers would be elected...I didn't have to worry about election because I was director at the headquarters. The Italians, Frank Stella, who was a big wheel in Michigan and President of the National Italian American Foundation, wanted to go to Italy, but our dear friend Max Rabb got that job. Frank is still actively involved.

At the conventions we had a committee for nominations, a committee for awards, a committee for human rights, a committee for this and that, and a committee for resolutions. Well, there was a fellow from New Jersey or Connecticut of Armenian extraction. The only trouble we would ever get into when we had these biannual conventions, and these groups would submit resolutions...the Greek Cyprus thing, the Armenian Turkish thing, or the Czech Slovak thing. The wording would be "...and therefore we demand that the President, the President-elect or the Platform Committee, do such and such." I would say, "I don't think you should use that language." It was an experience for me. I had served in two or three Asian countries and Poland and Czechoslovakia by this time, but to see these things here in American and in politics taking place it was an experience for me.

So we did have the things you are talking about within these groups. And, as I say it was difficult for me to maintain our status and position with Bush and Bill Brock and the staff when we would have some of these well intentioned but tunnel visioned people out there pounding and demanding. I would take the option of having two or three of our best people rewrite these resolutions and tone them down, revise or eliminate them, because in some respects we were our own worst enemy.

I was in Prague at the time, but you may recall that in 1988, that somebody had to release, fire or let go four or five friends of mine in the ethnic division of the Republican Party because of their...not Drew Pearson, but his successor. Anyway he would pull these things up as he did about every four years. It didn't really make a difference in past years, '68, '72, '76, when he would pull out one of the people...an Hungarian who was with the Hungarian Youth with the Nazis, or the Romanian or the Bulgaria or whatever. But this time, 1988, there were four over which such a row was made that Bush and company had to take these people out of their positions and drop them from lists and committees, etc. It was a shame because they were good Americans the last 30 or 40 years. But some of their past caught up with them. It was when they were in their youth for the most part.

Q: You went over to work with the People-to-People Program, didn't you?

NIEMCZYK: Right. You know the ethnic vote played a substantial part in the election of Nixon in 1972. We worked very hard in 1976 and in my opinion Ford should have won that election. The American public was looking for a real American, a friendly type, a down-to-earth person, unlike the Rockefellers, the Kennedys, and the Nixons. I think they had it in Jerry Ford. But they also had it to some extent in Jimmy Carter. Carter won for a number of reasons. One is that the Republican National Committee, although I was there getting...I mentioned in passing that a woman, Mary Louise Smith was someone I prefer not to comment on, but it was during her regime that the Ford election came up and she didn't pay enough attention to the American ethnic groups. She dealt with the Young Republicans and the move towards the blacks, hispanics, women, etc. As a result we lost a lot of support in the ethnic groups. The Greeks went to Jimmy Carter to my recollection, as did a number of Italians. Dear old Frank Stella was then, and even now, President of the National Italian American Foundation. Just an awful lot of ethnic groups here and there the poll showed voted for Jimmy Carter.

But all the while we were still planting the seeds and working hard, even through the Carter regime, up through the period that Bush was running as a candidate, Dole was running as a candidate, Reagan was running as a candidate. I was in a neutral position but leaned towards Bush at the time, but I still supported all these other people...I meaning we of the Heritage Groups. But we planted the seeds through this long period of time as we watched Jimmy Carter take over.

Then there was an incentive of getting him out after a couple of years. We would see the pendulum swing back a little bit because the ethnics weren't treated any better by Carter than they had been under Ford and Nixon. So we were able to have a ground swell of a return to the Republican vote, whether they were registered Republicans, Independents or Democrats, to the point where it was an overwhelming vote on the part of the American ethnic for Ronald Reagan and George Bush. And, that meant eight years for me at the National Committee and I figured I couldn't improve upon that election and the part we played, and we got a new chairman that I wasn't overjoyed with, so I resigned two months after the inauguration. I had done my thing and I enjoyed it. I made a number of contacts who later helped me.

Throughout this time I had been on the Board of Trustees of People-to-People since 1974 and in the early '80s I was elected chairman of the Executive Committee, a 15 person body. The CEO of People-to-People, headquartered in Kansas City, went to St. Luke's Hospital for a lung operation. The doctor told Jim, that was his name, that he would be in the hospital for 7-10 days and would be able to make the biannual worldwide conference in Washington, which he had been working on for six months, with no problem. Well, after the operation while still in the hospital he developed pneumonia and died.

His funeral was in Kansas City, and while there I called an emergency meeting of the Executive Committee. Seven, eight or nine of the 15 which constitute a quorum attended the funeral. We held a day and a half meeting in Kansas City and tried to figure out what we were going to do about the worldwide conference. We decided that it must go on because we had the Vice President and a number of other things already scheduled. Then the Committee decided that I should establish a search committee to replace Jim as the chief executive officer. I appointed three people and gave them 60 to 90 days to come up with someone. Well, they came up with me. I said, "Well, let me have 30 days to think about this." To make a long story short I became the CEO because my predecessor died unexpectedly.

I moved out to Kansas City in January, 1983, and was there for three years and six or eight months. All the while, though, I had been considered for Poland as Ambassador, in late '83. My colleague, Ed Derwinski, who is now Secretary of Veterans Affairs, was asked if he would go and he turned it down. When asked who he thought would be a good candidate, he gave them my name. I went through a selection process and there were two career and one political, I being the political. Two were selected out and one was selected for. I was not selected for Poland.

A year went by and I was out on a trip with People-to-People from Kansas City in Italy. I got a long distance call from the Director of Presidential Personnel, saying that they were going to submit my name for Romania. Would I be agreeable? I said I would be agreeable, although I wasn't overjoyed with Romania. Again three names went in, two selected out and I was one of them. Someone else went to Romania.

Finally I got a call saying that they thought they had sorted this thing out. Two posts were up, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The White House was going to go in with the Eagleburger predecessor, Shultz, Brent Scowcroft's predecessor and the Director of Presidential Personnel, Bob Tuttle. The game plan was to say, "Okay guys, we have two posts. You in State Department will select which ever one you want for a career Foreign Service Officer and we are going to assign a political appointee to the other post." Well with Hungary coming up well ahead of the other eastern northern tier group in the economy, they selected Mark Palmer and having done that I was the one selected for Czechoslovakia. I was notified of this in January and it took four or five months for the FBI investigation to be completed.

I came to Washington in June, 1986 and went through the coordination and other meetings with Departments and Agencies in consultation at State Department and preparation for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and was approved at midnight of the night before they recessed for the August summer recess. I appeared in Prague September 11, 1986.

Q: What was the situation in Czechoslovakia when you arrived in 1986?

NIEMCZYK: Naturally the Eastern Europe division and the Czech Desk officer and others filled me in on what was going on over there. So I knew when I arrived that both people in Washington and Prague would be asking me, "What changes have you seen in the hierarchy, etc.?" Well, there were no changes. The same people who had gone in in 1968 when I left...Husak was still President, Bielak still the Chairman of the Communist Party, and Jakes the Prime Minister. There had been no changes. We had this big thing printed in 1969 with the photographs and titles and two photos had been x-ed across...both had deceased. The rest had remained for 20 long years, taking the perks and dealing the hardship to the people. In that respect there was no change.

I used to say that I noticed when I was there 20 years ago, to get from Prague to Brno it took you four hours on a two lane highway, now, 20 years later, it takes two hours on a new four lane highway. That was one thing that I would point out. There was probably an improvement in the variety of commodities in the store fronts in the town. I said earlier that in '68 there were a lot of commodities but not a variety. Clothing was more abundant in the stores. Not too expensive.

I think Czechoslovakia kept the lid on prices as it did keeping the lid on its people. They had those advantages. Then they had the cons as well. I am reminded that if a Czech national or a Slovak national didn't toe the line of communism, if they were in a two-bedroom apartment, they would be threatened or in fact moved to a one bedroom apartment with all their family. Or, if they were in a Charter 77 group and were involved in opposing the government or participating in night time meetings, or meeting too often with members of the American Embassy, or the Ambassador, their children would not be permitted after elementary or high school to go on to higher education. Travel in and out of the country was very tightly controlled. So with those things staring them in the face, it had a tendency to keep the people in line.

Religion was about the same. I saw a different improvement. I am a Catholic as I mentioned earlier and my wife and I would go to the different churches around Prague to see the Gothic, the Renaissance, the Baroque architecture, and also to go out and get a free instrumental ...some churches would be only organ, some organ and choir or vocalist, but there were one or two churches where every Sunday you could count on an instrumental group of horns, violins, harps, etc. They would play a Mozart Mass in D, or something like that. It was truly a pleasure. Not only a religious pleasure but an appreciation of architecture and music hour. What we would see would be more young people when I was there as Ambassador 20 years later. We would see these young people

come in, churches were unheated in the winter, all bundled up and be in groups and if there were no seats available they would be seated over on an elevated platform just listening to the music, maybe not the sermon. There was a tendency more of the youth to get involved in religion and still later for the youth to get involved in this opposition to the government...The youth, the Catholic Church and the Charter 77.

Q: Would you explain, because this was a very important element, what Charter 77 was and how you, as the Ambassador, and your Embassy dealt with it during this period when you were there from 1986-89?

NIEMCZYK: Charter 77 was a group of, I think, about 1,200 people who in 1977 signed a charter opposing certain activities and principles of their own country and the Communist leadership didn't like this at all. Therefore, they accused the Charter 77 people in opposing the Communist government, of being traitors, etc. The officials to me would even refer to the Charter 77 people as their enemies. So the Charter 77 people were often under surveillance, often jailed, as was Václav Havel and many, many others. Their life was miserable and they went from Jiri Diensteier, for example, who was in public affairs, press, in 1968 was relegated to being a coal stoker. He is now the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Havel, now the President, was jailed so many times and I as Ambassador with the Embassy, with the State Department, with the White House, were responsible for getting him out of jail. During the period he was in jail only his wife could visit. We tried to get members of my staff to visit. Impossible. My wife would visit, Olga, his wife, at their five story walkup apartment with boxes of two items...one he needed and one he didn't. Very strong vitamin tablets which we would get at the Nürnberg Exchange, which he needed because he had respiratory problems and health problems and cigarettes, which he didn't need but he was a chain smoker and still is. Then his wife would take those over to the jail.

There was a Catholic priest, Father Maly, who was defrocked, not permitted to do anything like serving mass these 20 years, now has his own parish in Prague. And I could go on and on.

Q: The Embassy with the full support of the American Government was responsible for getting Havel out of jail. Now Havel was a Czech citizen, there was no connection with the United States. How is one be instrumental in accomplishing this?

NIEMCZYK: I would go to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and say, "I have a list of four things here that I have been instructed by the State Department to bring to your attention, Mr. Minister. Out in Slovakia you have Mr. Novotny in jail and you ought to be giving some thoughts to improving your human rights which you tell us you want to do. Get him out of jail. You have Václav Havel in jail now for the second time and you are talking to us about your not having Most Favored Nation treatment and you desperately need it and

you do, in fact, need it, but you are not going to get it unless you do a couple of these things."

Then a CODEL of Senators or Representatives would come in. I can remember John Glenn, Senator from Ohio, with a group of five. Barbara Mikulski, who is of Polish heritage, Senator from Maryland. Senator Thad Cochran from Mississippi. Senator Kit Bond from Missouri. Another time Senators John Warner of Virginia and Sam Nunn of Georgia came in to discuss arms control matters with the military. But each time we would set meetings up for a CODEL they would always ask for the highest level...the President, Chairman of the Party, Minister of Foreign Affairs...some times they would get two out of three or three out of four...and out of meanness the Czechs would not let them see somebody. But on those visits there would be an opportunity again at a very high level of government...Senators and Representatives, and we would talk in my Embassy secure room..."Senator here is what we hope you are going to drive home when you talk...Havel was in jail, Novotny was in jail, the continued surveillance of these people, etc....they are not helping themselves by improving their human rights so that they can ultimately get MFN."

So to answer your question, through myself, my private visits with them, and bringing in these senior level Senators and Representatives, they too would extend the voice of the American Government to these leaders and they would take note at times.

Q: The MFN, Most Favored Nation, why would the Czechs be interested? They were integrated into the Soviet economy so what difference would it make to them?

NIEMCZYK: They truly want to trade with America and without the MFN the meager five or six items that I recall that they were able to sell to the US...ham, beer, leather goods, etc....had such a terrific tax, 37 or 47 percent tax not being a member of MFN, but if they got MFN treatment it would be reduced to 7 or 8 percent tax.

Q: What about the British and French Ambassadors? Were they playing an equal type game?

NIEMCZYK: The Czechs will tell you, as they told me, that the French and the British and others came in after they saw what the US, we, were doing. My predecessor, Bill Luers, was involved as well in supporting them in this respect. My effort was just a continuation of his effort. The Dutch, I guess, came in first. They were very effective. Then the French and the Italians and West Germans learned. We would have NATO meetings monthly at various embassies and would report on what we had done. I would report on what our last visiting Congressional delegation was able to do. They got the idea that this was the way to go.

Q: Did your Embassy have contact with members of Charter 77?

NIEMCZYK: Yes. I had an officer on my staff who had as a big part of his job to maintain contact with the Charter 77 people. He would invite them to his home for drinks, would have once a month an open house for them to come. Of course, there would be surveillance and everybody who went to his house for drinks and small finger food would be noted and surveilled. Some of them would not be permitted to leave their apartment or be permitted to enter his house from the street side. So once in a while I would go. My wife and I would occasionally entertain them, half a dozen more or less, at the residence. Of course they were surveilled there. But Bob Norman, who was the person in charge...my staff used to get a little envious of Bob because they all wanted to help these people out and be in touch with them. I spread the wealth around a little bit. But it was Bob's main job.

Regrettably for him, three weeks before he was to leave, he was PNGed by the Czech government for his dealings with Charter 77, the opposition and the enemy. This meant that all the farewell parties that had been planned were scrubbed. It was unfair.

Q: What was your impression and those you were working with in the Embassy of the Charter 77 people at the time? Was this in a way a PR job? Did you feel these were ideologues or nice people but it wasn't going any where but we should support them? What was the feeling towards the group?

NIEMCZYK: Clearly they were being discriminated and persecuted in many respects. They were jailed, surveilled, arrested and their apartments were entered and ransacked. We felt for them. We were concerned that their numbers didn't grow as you might have expected them to do. I think I mentioned that there was originally 1200 or 1500 signatories, but for some reason...maybe they didn't recruit...their numbers always remained constant. But you would have other elements out there. The Catholic Church and the young people and others who would have a participating part to play, but they would not identify themselves as a Charter 77 person.

Q: What was the role of CIA there? How did you find it, as Ambassador, as a tool to keep you informed?

NIEMCZYK: Satisfactory. Nothing real great. The benefits that we derived from the Station, and we had both CIA and NSA, was from the electronic devices that we had in the Embassy. As a CIA operation they would read the papers and look at what was going on and make their reports. I had access to their chron file. They were reporting in competition with the State Department. That didn't bother me. It might have bothered the State Department. It was a small, three or four person station. All of them had some sort of cover that permitted them to operate all right. But they were never out doing the more covert type operations. They would do a little surveillance once in a while and they had a dead drop where they would leave messages or pick up reports. I can't recall anything of extreme importance. It was helpful. Except for the electronics which was very good.

Q: We are talking about the first two years that you were there when things seemed to be static. What would a typical day for an ambassador be like?

NIEMCZYK: Up in the morning. Do a little exercise cycle at home. Get to the office early, often before some of the staff. They finally got the idea that they should be in ahead of me or with me.

I would go over the previous night's cables which had been sorted out for me...I didn't see the routine administrative cables...read them and put routing slips on them. The DCM, sitting in the next office to me, would have the same stack of items, maybe he would have something more like admin, finance, etc. which he later would bring to my attention. But I would read first the traffic and designate the responsible action officer or note it to be an item for discussion at the next NATO ambassadors meeting. Or, if a response was required I would note that.

Then our mail would come in. The secretary would have a folder for me with the incoming mail and I would read all of that, again with routing slips indicate the action officer, or I would send it to the DCM...
Q: Who was your DCM?

NIEMCZYK: I had for the first year the man my predecessor had selected and because he still had a year of his tour...I learned later that it was really set up by the State Department while I was involved in consultation and meeting the Departments and Agencies...they permitted him to travel back on State Department orders and per diem to meet and talk to me and tell me that he had one more year to go and would like to be my DCM. I didn't have a chance to meet with his wife and that was part of the problem that I experienced later. But the good natured part of me took hold and with all the State Department people saying this man was top notch, and he was good, I said all right.

But this man had worked two years for my predecessor. There was a loyalty factor and a difficulty on his part to adjust, but the handwriting was on the wall. I had a year with him when I wasn't getting the max out of him for me. Bill Luers would call long distance from New York and talk to Carl Schmidt and say, "Hey, Carl, I am coming in next week. Could you do this and that for me?" I finally told Carl, "Look, if Bill Luers, who I know, wants anything from this Embassy, tell him to call me." It was just one of these little predecessor/successor things that was carried over by the DCM.

Then I was able to select my own guy. I got a guy, Ted Russell, who had served with me during the Soviet invasion, he was a junior officer and I was the DATT. He knew the language. He was Terrence Todman's DCM for four years. And that told me a lot. Ted was a top notch person.

That answers your question. I had one year with my predecessor's DCM. Not the best arrangement but we made it work. Then Ted Russell and his wife came in and we had a

real fine operation. Then Ted stayed on for one year with Shirley Temple Black. She now has her own person there.

I would certainly make the recommendation to the State Department that it make every effort, unless there is a problem of death or illness in the family or something like that, not to leave the ambassador position empty for more than two or three weeks, four at the most. Because, if you have a DCM there as Chargé d'Affaires for three, four or five months, there is a normal situation that develops where he is elevated in stature and status by not only his counterpart DCMs but by the ambassadors from the various countries. He participates in ambassadorial meetings. This makes it very difficult, on occasion, for the incoming ambassador to have this situation exist. A maximum of two, three or four weeks between the outgoing ambassador and the incoming ambassador.

Q: While you were in Czechoslovakia did you have a feeling that things were beginning to stir and change?

NIEMCZYK: We could see more interest by the Czechs and Slovaks people in the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe. Those people that lived down on the Austrian or German border who had television sets could get programs, news, could see commercials...see what kind of cars people in the West were driving, type of necktie wearing, shoes, bicycles, etc. This word would spread inland and throughout Czechoslovakia.

We would see more interest on the part of the youth in what was going on outside. We would see people being prepared to take more risks. I said earlier that the Czechoslovak Communist Party elements did a super job in keeping the lid on for this many, many years. I arrived in 1986 but in '87, '88, and early '89, you could see various changes. More people attending church. We would go out on wreath laying ceremonies...ten sites in the Western Czech Lands in the spring; 14 sites in Slovakia in the fall. The Voice of America would announce where I would be giving the date and time and where. The numbers would grow from 200 to 300, or from 300 to 400, or from 400 to 500. These people were truly taking risks because we would be accompanied by the secret police who would be there with their still camera or video tape. But nevertheless the people turned out in increasing numbers.

People had more of a tendency to turn up at our national days, or come to our homes, where in the past they would say, "I want to come but would rather not because they will have me under surveillance and I might get in trouble again." Things were going in this direction.

The Czechs and Slovaks were not as aggressive as the Poles to the north with their Solidarity, for example. There were no labor unions in Czechoslovakia.

My three years I consider were critical and crucial to the things that ultimately happened in the November/December of 1989. It was during this three year period that people's attitudes were changing and they were becoming more courageous, a little more

aggressive, a little more prepared to get involved. What they saw which was happening with the Polish Solidarity success and the mass exodus of the East Germans through Czechoslovakia into Hungary and on into Austria and then out into West Germany...and hearing this and then seeing it on CNN if they had television. Word of mouth got around pretty well. There was the underground press and radio. Then with the news of the Berlin Wall coming down and the...

Q: This was in late 1989?

NIEMCZYK: Well, yeah. This was in the months of August, September, October. The Czechs developed the courage that they had been developing where instead of 2000 turning out at demonstrations, 10,000, 15,000, 20,000 would turn out. So, yes, I could see gradual things happening. I couldn't have predicted what happened.

Q: All of you must have been looking to the East at the rise of Gorbachev and his change. In a way Gorbachev and his policies and eventually the renunciation of the Brezhnev's doctrine of interference into neighboring socialist countries was crucial. But were you getting good reports on Gorbachev and were you seeing the impact both from the viewpoint of the Embassy but also of the Czech Communist Government view of Gorbachev?

NIEMCZYK: Yes, and I have to say what I didn't say earlier, a factor in all of this was the Gorbachev change in policy. No question about it. This gave the Czechs and Slovaks the feeling that their was hope. The Czechoslovak Communist Party didn't like it at all and we would go into meetings, either myself or with Embassy staff or with a Congressional Delegation, and say, "Well look, President Gorbachev is doing such and such." The hard-line Czechs even at the 11th hour in their futility would say, "Just because the Russians opened their umbrellas in Moscow, and when it rains, doesn't mean we will do the same in Czechoslovakia." They would say that they didn't necessarily follow everything. But I feel that some of them saw the handwriting on the wall.

Q: Did they really? They seemed to have hung on. It just seemed at one point that they couldn't use force, it wouldn't work. Did you see any let up or were the government people hanging on?

NIEMCZYK: There was let up by some early on, but the hard-liners held on until the very last hour.

Q: What was your impression of the Czech Party people in dealing with them?

NIEMCZYK: You know, some of them would take me off to the side and say, "Look, this is my livelihood. I have to feed my family and I have to do something. I joined the Communist Party but I don't like...." One person who was in the Foreign Ministry, he had been Czech ambassador to Canada, took me off one time and said, "Look, in my youth I was an altar boy, Catholic. Even now I slip away and go to confession once a year just to

stay with the Church." This is one of a few examples that I could recall and cite. But it was sort of a gradual...the hard-liners, no, they did stay on until they were thrown out or were overwhelmed by the demonstrations.

We mentioned the Gorbachev factor and Solidarity. Another factor I feel had strong influence over the years but which hasn't been given proper attention to was the election of the current Pope.

Q: He was Polish. John Paul II.

NIEMCZYK: His periodic, frequent utterances against Communism and Communist rule...naturally the Poles were the first ones to be grateful for this, but it had a swelling effect and filtered throughout the other areas of Eastern Europe. He stayed with it throughout the 12 or 14 years and I really feel strongly that his persistence in doing the things he did in his announcements and comments against the Communist regime played an important role in the minds of the people.

Q: What about security during this time? For one thing we had a problem in Moscow with our Marine Security Guards who felt that they were compromised. During the time you were there did you feel the still dead hand of the security surveillance, entrapment type problem?

NIEMCZYK: It was ever present. There was entrapment on occasion. They tried with our Marines and some of our Embassy people. Any time in the Middle East, before the Persian Gulf, that an American would shoot down an Iranian plane or something would happen with the PLO there would be a demonstration against the American Embassy or some other Western Embassy. Stones would be thrown to break windows and Czech police would do very little if anything to dissuade or stop them. We were concerned about that both at the Embassy and out at my residence where my wife stayed and there were visitors and an Embassy family living in an apartment on the third floor. We would have bomb threats and scares which would be of some concern to us. The Marines would go out and check it out, either at the Embassy or the residence. That gave Security problem areas. These were just occasional or periodic events that would be caused not by the Czech and Slovak connection, but by a Middle East event or an event outside of the country.

Q: Did you protest or make it known to the Czech Government that we were very concerned about the fact that almost everything that gets blown up in this period was using Czech explosives and that there was a lot of evidence that they were training terrorists, etc.?

NIEMCZYK: We talked to them about the training of the terrorists. We didn't know about this sentex until later on, but then we did make it a topic of discussion. Of course now they say that they don't sell it for those purposes.

But I should go back to the demonstration by outside country students or people living in Czechoslovakia. Later on, close to the end of this, still in my tour, we would be tipped off on occasion by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that they have learned that there would be a demonstration against the US Embassy or the NATO Embassies and there would be police there. Now this didn't happen in the early part of my tour, but in the later part of my tour it did.

Q: You left in 1989 after the Reagan Administration is over and George Bush is taking over and your normal time was up. Did you plan to leave at that time?

NIEMCZYK: We all went out, as they are doing now, with the understanding that it would be a three year tour. I left a month and a half short of my tour. In retrospect I would have liked to have been there when this took place. My wife and I were glued to the television as it took place. And even today, I am on the speaking circuit and I talk about Czechoslovakia principally, and refer to Poland to the north and Hungary to the south, and the problems of the transition period, but I have been invited to things like the Association for the Former Members of Congress which had a meeting a couple of weeks ago. Rita Klimova was there, the spokesperson. I was invited to a reception at the Czech Embassy a few weeks ago when the Prime Minister, who may not be Prime Minister after June 5, was present. And on each occasion...Rita Klimova, the Ambassador, would make the comment that I was there during the critical, crucial hard time period and was not able to be there during happier times to enjoy the results of some of my efforts. She was vocal on that. Those sorts of things are not often said. It is always good to hear them.

Q: How did you find the East European part of the European Bureau in the Department of State? How responsive was it to you?

NIEMCZYK: At times very helpful, more often mediocre.

Q: Why was this?

NIEMCZYK: I would rather not get into that. There were just a couple of senior personalities that felt that Czechoslovakia was totally lost. I didn't believe that. I felt that you had on the one hand the hard-line Communist Party to deal with, and they must be dealt with not only by me but by the hierarchy of the US. The policy at the Assistant Secretary of State level and elsewhere was "We won't give them any recognition by sending over anyone higher than a GS-15 or a Deputy Assistant Secretary." My attitude was to send in the senior people and let them pound the desk. You have on the one hand the Communist leadership to deal with, but you had 15 million people that counted on encouragement and support from the United States. And as a People-to-People man I gave high priority to that and I felt let down at times.

Q: Poland was running ahead of events. By this time Poland was really pretty much out of the Soviet orbit, wasn't it? Things were changing so rapidly even while you were there. Did you feel that Poland was absorbing...?

NIEMCZYK: Poland and Hungary.

Q: But wasn't anyone looking...the Czechs may be quiet right now but very obviously they are a well educated people and if Poland and Hungary are moving so rapidly, shouldn't we be nudging and doing things in Czechoslovakia?

NIEMCZYK: In Poland and Hungary the police had a tendency to ease off. In Czechoslovakia they did not. They maintained the hard-line right up to the end. My position was to get in the higher level American official instead of the low level types and read them the act. This was not done for the most part. A couple of instances, yes. John Whitehead would come in and he was real stern and tough with them. His visits were very important and useful. But he would come and go and then they would go back to square one.
I wasn't overjoyed with the East European Division's support in Czechoslovakia. Some of it was good, better at times, but normally mediocre.

Q: Well, Mr. Ambassador I thank you very much. This has been fascinating. I really enjoyed this.

NIEMCZYK: Well, I have, too.

End of interview