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

MARGARET L. PLUNKETT

Interviewer: Thomas D. Bowie
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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Tom Bowie interviewing my good friend and former colleague, Margaret Plunkett, who is now living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. This interview is being conducted for the Labor Diplomacy Oral History Project. Margaret, can you tell me about your background, education, and what brought about your interest in labor?

PLUNKETT: I think that my interest in labor was a matter of the genes, because so much of my personal history has been connected with labor-oriented things. For example, my mother was the first woman cutter in the garment industry in New York City, years before the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) was born. Labor people have always been astonished that this could have been the case. But it was, and she was belligerent enough as an employee. She never went beyond grade school. When the cutting room boss told her she had to be at work at eight o'clock in the morning, she deliberately came in at nine as usual. He locked her out, so she started home. On the way, she met the top boss. He asked, "Where are you going?" She replied, "I'm going home. I'm not going to pay any attention to that fellow. He locked me out." So the top boss said, "Oh, come on." Her name was Sophia. "Come on back, Sophia. I've been thinking of raising your pay anyway, so you'll get $14 a week from now on, and you come to work when you want to."

Q: He must have appreciated her work.

PLUNKETT: Oh, yes. She was a pretty skilled person. Anyway, the next step in my story is that when I was about five years old, I first met my cousin, Harry Van Arsdale, Jr., whose mother was a Plunkett. He later became very prominent and very famous as the President of the AFL-CIO Labor Council of New York City. At his funeral 3,000 people overflowed St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York. We maintained contact all through our lives. His right-hand man all those years was another cousin, Christopher Plunkett. I also kept in touch with him. My father was a small plumbing contractor in New York City. He

died in 1916, so you can see how significant it was that he never would hire a worker, a plumber, who was not a member of the plumbers' union.

Q: That was marvelous.

PLUNKETT: Wasn't it? And furthermore, his views were considered by some to have been a little to the left. He voted for Eugene Debs in 1912. So I got a good early start in labor politics. Then at Cornell University, I majored in American History and Political Science. I took three degrees from Cornell and was an assistant in history during the darkest days of the Depression, so I have no real bitter experience of the Depression, but of course I wasn't paid very much. After I left there, I went first to the New York State Department of Labor and worked in the Unemployment Insurance Division.

Q: What year would that have been?

PLUNKETT: That would have been in 1936. I joined the research staff of the division before the [New York State] unemployment insurance law had been reviewed by the United States Supreme Court, so it was "if" and "whether" the law would be okayed by the Supreme Court. The major work that we did was to prepare the economic brief that was to be presented to the Court to accompany the legal brief that was being prepared by the state solicitor general. I edited the entire economic brief, and wrote the section on social aspects of the unemployment insurance law. We were a bunch of young people in that research division. It was a very rewarding experience.

We all went to Washington to listen to the presentation by the New York State authorities of the case before the Supreme Court. The law was approved overwhelmingly by the Court. I don't remember the vote, but I think it was unanimous. And that was the test of the whole unemployment insurance system in the country, because New York State was the first state to have its law challenged. I remember when the word came through, we all went out and got sozzled in celebration.

So from there I was invited to join the newly established section on labor and industrial relations at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was there for maybe three years. I set up their research library and participated in the initial studies that were being done. By that time the direction in which I was going was obvious. Then, as the war approached, I thought it would be more interesting to be in Washington. When I went down there to interview, I was fortunate to find that one of the economics professors who had been at MIT was already employed on the Wage Stabilization Board. He hired me pronto.

Q: What was his name?

PLUNKETT: Oh, I haven't the vaguest idea. [laughter] That is true of a lot of these recollections. After all, that was a long time ago. That was on the eve of the declaration of war, which took place on the very day I arrived in Washington. I was driving by myself,

and I was going to stay with some friends for a while. When I got there the young man of the house said, "What do you think of it?" I said, "Of what?" "Well," he said, "We're at war. Didn't you know?" I hadn't heard. I was driving, and I hadn't stopped anywhere. Anyway, I went right to work on December 8, 1941, for the War Production Board in the civil requirements section. There was great need in those days to know what we had to have in order to pursue the war.

I found that job very uninteresting. It had nothing to do with people, except if they might become consumers, but that was not the point of the job. It was to estimate what we needed from where, and how much, to meet all of the necessary public requirements. So anyway after two years there, I was ready to throw in the towel. I was bored to death. I called an old friend of mine, Mrs. Aryness Wickens, who had been with the Treasury Department but who had transferred to Labor. I had spent a year at the Brookings Institution during my graduate work, so I knew quite a few people. So I called her and asked her for a reference to the War Labor Board. She said, "Well, give me a couple of hours till I consult some people in our own Wage Division, because we're looking for people." And in short order she called me back and said, "Come over and talk to the head of the Wage Division in the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)." She was then the assistant director of BLS.

So in a short time, I transferred to BLS in the Labor Department. It was a very happy move and I stayed at BLS until I got a better offer from the Women's Bureau. I was in BLS heading up a special studies section, and one of the studies we made was at the request of then Senator Truman, who was head of a committee that had something to do with war production. I still have a copy of that study. It was to compare government owned munitions plants and privately owned ones with respect to wages, working conditions, etc. At the time it was classified but I kept a copy, and I still have it somewhere.

In any case the position of head of the wage division of the New York City regional office of the BLS fell vacant, or I think the person heading it was fired, as a matter of fact. They asked me if I would be interested in transferring to the New York office, which I did do. After all, New York was my birthplace, and I have always loved New York City. So I went up there and got started on it. I found to my horror that the agents who went out to interview employers with respect to wages, hours and all that kind of thing were making up schedules. They weren't even bothering to interview the employers. I guess that's why the previous holder of this job was fired.

Q: And what did you do?

PLUNKETT: Well, I was the head of the wage section. I got them all together and told them I had learned what was going on, and from that moment, they were not to do that anymore. I would watch them very carefully to see that they didn't. It was kind of a tough job. No woman had ever headed one of those sections in New York, and so there was

some hostility. You know those New York boys; they think they're special. Well, I was a New York girl, so I thought I was special, too.

Anyway, very shortly after that, Frieda Miller, who was head of the Women's Bureau in the Department of Labor in D.C., rushed into my office one day and said, "What are you doing here?" and I told her. She said, "I had planned to ask you to join the Women's Bureau as head of the labor legislation division." My reply was, "Well, you didn't ever say anything like that to me." You see, she had been head of the New York State Industrial Department. They called her he industrial commissioner," although it was labor that was her specialty. So she asked me, "Well now, will you come back?" I said I had just arrived in New York and couldn't do that. She was offering me a grade promotion with a thousand dollars a year more than I was getting and oh, it was *riches*. So I said, "Well, I'll tell you. I'm not going to raise my finger about this at all. But if you can negotiate this with Bob Myers. . ." He was then head of wage studies in Washington. Did you ever know Bob?

Q: No, I don't know him but have certainly heard of him.

PLUNKETT: A wonderful guy. I had a funny experience with him. I always worked late and got to work late in the morning, so I was still there around half past six, when his secretary-she was a stupid woman-came around and said, "Mr. Myers wants to know if you're available." And I said, "You tell him, 'Yes, I'm available, but I'm pretty expensive!' " [laughter] Dear Bob, when I told him-I don't know whether she told him; she might have told him that-he laughed his head off. He thought that was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

Anyway within six months, Miss Miller had negotiated my transfer. I was very ambivalent about that, but after all a grade promotion and a thousand dollars were very important in those years. So I was with the Women's Bureau from 1945 to 1951 and had a very productive time there.

The two major areas in which I worked in the Women's Bureau were in the revision of state minimum wage orders for women and minors and equal pay for women legislation. This was before the concern over the program of minimum wages in the states and before the national minimum wage law, which didn't cover the areas of work that the state laws did. For example, restaurants, laundries, and all of the service industries were not covered by the federal law. During that time we helped states revise their minimum wage orders. One case I remember very vividly: The minimum wage in laundries in Arizona was 15 and a half cents an hour. Mind you, this was during World War II, and we got them to revise that up to 27 ½ cents an hour. Imagine, suggesting 27 ½ cents an hour to any young person these days! The other major area was equal pay for women and there were no such state laws at that time.

The Women's Bureau, to its great credit, promoted that and long after I left the Women's Bureau, maybe ten years later, most of the states had passed equal pay laws. I was very

active on that topic, and I actually wrote the first resolution supporting equal pay for women that passed the Congress. It was just a resolution. It was not a law. It had nothing to do with establishing any standards, but the Labor Department then pursued this, and we worked up very elaborate proposals for laws, which, of course, never were passed until 1964, when legislation covering federal equal pay was passed as an amendment to the national minimum wage law. It was a very interesting and complicated business, but it finally was passed. That doesn't mean that women are getting equal pay altogether even now, but during the war this effort to get equal pay for women really plunged right ahead, because women were taking over the factory jobs of men who had gone off to war, and women workers were desperately needed.

Q: How did you get into the Foreign Service?

PLUNKETT: All this is a build up to my final association with the government in the Foreign Service. Along came the Korean War and I was working for the Wage Stabilization Board. I had transferred there from the Women's Bureau, because Miss Miller was reluctant to give me a promotion, which I thought I deserved, and I had an advantageous offer from the Wage Stabilization Board, so I took it. As my old collateral relative, George Washington Plunkett, said, "I seen my opportunities and I took 'em."

While I was at the Wage Stabilization Board (WSB), the State Department asked me if I would be interested in going as Labor Adviser to the Technical Aid Mission in Israel. Well, I had changed jobs a lot in my life, and I was again ready to change. So I said, "Yes. I'd like to do that." So they appointed me. This was not a regular State Department appointment. I was on loan to the State Department from Labor for a two-year stint. So I took a leave from the BLS and went over to Israel.

Q: I see Golda Meir's picture here in your apartment.

PLUNKETT: That's right, and it says on it "Love, Golda." She was a wonderful woman and 1953 was when I first met Golda. She was Minister of Labor at that time. Well, the appointment as Labor Adviser to the Technical Aid Mission was an extremely interesting part of my life. We weren't part of the Embassy, but we were associated with it. The Embassy was superior in authority to the Mission, but it wasn't the governing board, so to speak. The Director of the Mission was a political appointee. This was during the Eisenhower administration. When the time came for me to leave for my post, I had to go to some office where there were people hiring people for the Eisenhower administration.

They probably took one sniff of me and said, "She's no Eisenhower supporter, and maybe we oughtn't to send her." And they said that to me-not that I wasn't an Eisenhower supporter, but that they had somebody else that they might want to send on that job. And I said, "You better not. I've given notice on my apartment and arranged for my furniture to be stored during this time. The Mission has assigned me an apartment there, and you can't undo that."

Q: Who were these people?

PLUNKETT: God only knows. They were young people who were Eisenhower appointees, and they were reviewing proposed appointments. So I hustled back to the Labor Department and said "I was told there was one more paper to be signed, and you better sign it this afternoon, because you've put me to all this bother of arranging to go there and I'm going." They signed the paper and circumvented those pipsqueaks who were trying to hire somebody else. It shows you what you can do if you open your mouth. When I was a kid my Mother used to say, "Don't be afraid to open your mouth." And I say, it hasn't been closed since!

Well, when I got to Israel, it was totally strange to me. I remember with embarrassment that when they said I would be stationed in Tel Aviv, I didn't know that Tel Aviv was the major city of the new state of Israel. I soon got to know it pretty well. Anyway, when you get to a new place like that, they make a formal appointment for you to meet the head of whatever agency you are assigned to. I went in to see him and he looked at me-He was a very nice man; we got to be good friends, but he wasn't very smart-and he said to me, "What are you doing here?" [laughter] I said, "Well, I was appointed to the position of Labor Adviser to the Mission. What is it that you want me to do?" Well, he fumbled and mumbled, and I was turned loose and actually I had to make the job.

Fortunately, his second in command was a much more sophisticated person and explained to me what we were supposed to do. We had different specialists on the staff there. The aim was to develop projects with the Government of Israel that would aid Israel in getting going. This was early 1953 when I went there, and they were still on their knees. It was a really remarkable time, and I was very glad to have been there at the very beginning.

As an example of the early difficulties, the local people had no access to the one first class butcher in Tel Aviv. The Embassy and the Mission people had to get permits from the Israeli Government to buy there. We were the only people, along with personnel of the other embassies of course, who could buy meat in that place. And it was not so elegant. You had to buy a hunk of beef, for example, wrapped up in brown paper. You didn't know what it was. It could have been the most tender steak, or it could have been the toughest hunk of beef, which I happened to buy once for local guests. After roasting, it was inedible. Instead, we wound up eating scrambled eggs.

Q: Was this kosher?

PLUNKETT: I don't know. It was an Israeli establishment, and whether it was kosher or not, I don't know.

Q: But it was a larger supplier of the meat?

PLUNKETT: It was <u>the</u> supplier. I do not think they were importing Argentine meat then, as they did later. And our agricultural man at the Mission established their cattle industry.

It was later a very productive operation in Israel. In many other countries, there was a lot of graft and not much solid work, but that wasn't true in Israel.

Q: Did you go to Embassy staff meetings or [the Mission] considered a parallel [body]?

PLUNKETT: Yes, we had our own staff meetings, to which I went of course. It wasn't too long after I got there, maybe a matter of six months, that this second in command-He is dead now, and I don't remember his name-said to me, "You know, we were thinking of getting somebody to handle projects in public administration, but we think that you should do that." Well, that tickled me, because that broadened my scope very widely."

In this new area of responsibility, we had Israeli counterparts, people in the government with whom we worked very directly and from whom we got requests or suggestions and to whom we made suggestions for projects. I was assigned to somebody who was all right, but really I found I couldn't work with him! He was such a fuss budget, and this, and that, so I finally went to a man who [later] became a very famous man in Israel, Teddy Kollek. He was Director General of the Prime Minister's office then and I said to him, "Look, I can't work with this man. Nothing is ever going to get done." So he said. "Fine. You're going to work with me."

So that's how I got to know Teddy Kollek. And we have remained very close friends ever since. I just had a letter from him the other day. He eventually became Mayor of Jerusalem and was Mayor for 28 years. When he was 83, he ran for the last time. Unfortunately, I think, he was defeated, but after you have had the same mayor for 28 years, and he's gotten old and not very well, you ditch him for somebody else. He personally was almost destroyed by it.

I happened to make a visit to Israel at the time of the election in the fall of 1993. My nephew and his wife went with me, because I couldn't manage it alone with my bum locomotion abilities. While there, we had lunch with Teddy. This was a few days before the election, and he looked dreadful, but I've seen him on television more recently when he was on a trip across the States, and he looked very relaxed. He's running the Israel Museum now, which was one of his creations. He was one of the most creative people I have ever known, and a wonderful money raiser. He could pry a million dollars from a beggar just as easily as eating supper!

In any case, back to the technical AID mission. The Israeli Government wanted to make a labor force survey. In 1931 the British, who then controlled that area, did a labor force survey, but they did not include the Arab population. They just took a labor force survey of the Jewish population. This was long before [the establishment of] the state, of course, and nothing in that field had happened since. Well, then the government wanted, quite sensibly, I thought, to have a rounded labor force survey. That was a major project that I handled while I was there.

I did another thing that I think was very important. I said to the Israelis, "You're planning, of course, to include the Arab population in your survey." Oh, yes, they were. Well, then I said to them that they must print the schedule that they were going to use in the Arab villages in Arabic, and they should hire Arabs to do the interviewing. Well, that seemed like an astonishing thought to the Israeli Government and even to our Mission. There was no connection between the Mission and the Arab population. It never spoke with the Arabs.

Q: Tell me, Margaret, how did you come upon that idea? What made you see the logic of it?

PLUNKETT: Well, it just came out of my head. After all, they were going to take a labor force survey, which is, in a sense, a kind of census. So I said, "Of course, since the British had never scheduled the Arabs, you've got to do it, because they are an important part of the Israeli population." They agreed, with a little persuasion, that that was true. They intended to cover the Arabs, but they didn't intend to do it except with Israeli personnel, and I thought to myself, this isn't going to be good.

Relations with the Arabs, and this was, of course, five years after the 1948 war, were relatively good. I can't say that they were good, but they were relatively good. I felt that, for the Israeli Arabs, of whom there were many, many thousands, people who hadn't run away during the 1948 war, it would give them a sense of belonging, and I felt that would be a positive thing for the Israeli Government to do. So, after some effort I got them to agree and they did it. They printed the schedules in Arabic that they were going to use in the Arab communities. Of course Israel had contacts with local Arabs, particularly through the Histadrut. I think the Histadrut was used in recruiting these Arab agents, but they did do that. My tour there ended before the publication of the survey, but that was the original survey, the first labor force survey that Israel had ever taken, and it is still going on today in a much improved, much extended, form.

I regard that as a real contribution, and it led me to an interest in what was going on in the Arab community. I carried that interest through until the time that I became Labor Attaché so when I went back 13 years later I had contacts in the Arab community.

Q: So you went there twice?

PLUNKETT: Yes, and I want to run these two assignments to Israel together, because they really are very related, and when I went there as Labor Attaché, my contacts in Israel were very much simpler, because I knew all these people.

Q: So, on the basis of what you had already accomplished, you had an advantageous position in the Embassy [when you returned] as Labor Attaché?

PLUNKETT: Oh, yes. I developed a number of other projects while I was there. One was job classification for government employees. You know, a new nation doesn't have all

these technical things and, after all, the Israelis were busy before their independence settling the country, and they weren't thinking about such fancy technical things as job classifications for employees. The fellows who were the most loyal party members got the jobs. Obviously, that's good Tammany Hall politics, and not terribly illogical either.

Anyway, before my second [overseas] assignment, I had a conference with State Department personnel who told me not to expect to go to London, Paris, or Rome. That made me mad, and I said to them, "I've been to London, Paris, and Rome. Send me someplace else." So they sent me to Holland. Now, my services as a Labor Attaché began with my assignment to Holland. I was there for five years. They didn't ask me what I wanted to do.

I notice on your questionnaire you ask, "What kind of training did you get before you went out as Labor Attaché?" There is one word that answers that: *None*. I didn't know what they expected people to do, but luckily I had that experience in the first assignment to Israel when I was on loan.

I came back after two years to the Labor Department. The overseas offer came later after Kennedy was elected. You know, in recent years all the presidents seem to have wanted to appoint a woman to something new, so they could claim the women's rights thing. So I was invited then to take the test for the Labor Attaché post. There had never been a woman appointed as Labor Attaché.

Anyway, to go back momentarily to my first service in Israel with the Mission, I got into a little trouble there because I was too zealous. After Eisenhower's election and Stevenson's defeat, Stevenson traveled all through that area, visiting many countries, and he came to Israel. The Embassy invited him to a reception, but the Embassy didn't invite anybody except the top dogs. They invited ambassadors from other embassies; they invited the top personnel at the Embassy; and they invited our Mission Director and the Assistant Director, but nobody else, excluding in particular the humble staff of secretaries, who were mostly all young women, who were mad as the devil because they were apparently all Stevenson supporters. They came to me and said "Miss Plunkett, would you help us? Would you write a letter to be delivered to Mr. Stevenson when he comes to Jerusalem inviting him to a reception by the secretarial and junior personnel of the Mission in Tel Aviv?"

Well, that was just a red flag you know. I said "Certainly, I'll do that. "And Stevenson came with his entourage. They had this party in the beautiful apartment building where we all lived, and I absented myself. That was one sensible thing I did in my career. I went up to Haifa to fill an engagement up there. It was convenient because I didn't want to seem to be the one who was promoting this rebellion. Well, the kids later told me that they had a wonderful time and Stevenson was so great and all that. But that put me in the dog house with the Embassy. They had not invited these youngsters, and somebody else, without asking anybody's permission, went ahead and set it up. I don't know how much that mattered, but I got some repercussions from it.

Another thing I did displeased the Embassy, but fortunately my background is Irish and I was never afraid of a fight. When I first went to the Mission, there was extra pay for work in a dangerous place, and Israel was considered a very dangerous place at that time. The State Department decided to abolish that extra pay, and I got another complaint from the staff. "Why should we lose this extra money? The situation hasn't changed."

And at that time you could see that that was true. On one occasion, I had been down to Jericho and when I was driving back I encountered a group of Arabs armed with rifles. walking behind big rocks towards Jerusalem and towards an outlying kibbutz. That went on all the time. Various kibbutzim were being attacked by the Arabs, so it was still a dangerous situation.

The staff, including the Embassy staff, couldn't go into East Jerusalem without getting a permit from Jordan. Every time you wanted to go you needed a permit from the Jordanian Government stating that you were admissible. I never had any problem. One of our Marines did. His name was Rosenberg, but he was not Jewish. Of course Rosenberg is a standard German name. He applied repeatedly to go over to the Old City and was rejected time after time. They said he was Jewish. His name was Jewish. Finally, his term of service was up, and he wanted to get to Jerusalem one way or another. What he did, foolish boy, was to write on his application that he was Catholic. That was supposed to be more acceptable, apparently, to the Jordanians. They investigated and found out he was not Catholic; he was a Protestant, and they reported back to the Embassy. "You see, he's Jewish." He was pretending to be Catholic. Of course, it was his own fault; he shouldn't have done that. Anyway that's just by the way, illustrating irritations that Embassy personnel had to face.

These kinds of experiences were not life-threatening but were examples of the constant atmosphere of tension when armed Arabs infiltrated into Israel, even well inside the borders, and when restrictions on movement outside Israel gave staff an almost constant claustrophobia. We couldn't go to Lebanon; we couldn't go to Jordan. The only nearby place we could go was Cyprus, but that was expensive and took too much time.

So I responded to the staff's request and wrote a petition to the State Department to restore the earlier salary levels. The Mission Director approved fully and invited the Ambassador to make it a joint request. The Ambassador declined, but it went on to State anyway. Within a few weeks the earlier salaries were restored to Mission personnel but not to Embassy personnel. The motto is "Don't be timid."

Now we come to the time when I was sent back to Israel as Labor Attaché. Although my first appointment as Labor Attaché was to Holland, I want to combine the Israel experiences, the two tours there, because they are so closely related, and then later I will come back to Holland, which is a very different type of experience from the point of view of the labor situation.

In 1967, I was transferred directly from Holland, where I had been Labor Attaché for five years, back to Israel. I resumed at once my connections with the people whom I had known before, including Golda Meir, who was then the Foreign Secretary. I had kept in touch with her over the years I was away from Israel. When she used to come to the United Nations for Israeli business, she always let me know and I went up to New York to see her. She was such a friendly, nice person to me. She wasn't always so nice. People complained about how she bit them on the nose when they didn't go along with her, but she never bit me. The one negative thing about Golda was that she didn't like cats.

Anyway, there were people in the Histadrut in 1967 who were still there since my earlier experience, and they had always been extremely friendly because many of the projects that I had suggested during my Mission days were things in which they were very much interested. In any case the job as Labor Attaché in Israel was very different from my job as adviser to the Mission in which there had been specific projects to work on. The Embassy job was more "office" work. You established relations and picked up what people thought about U.S. policy or Israeli policy. I became a member of the political staff in the Embassy; I was certainly not an integral part of it but I was attached to it.

I always thought, both in Israel and in Holland, that the Labor Attaché's job was the best in the Embassy. People with other specialties, like the Science Attaché, concentrated on the sciences, and the agriculture specialist concentrated on agricultural matters. Their contacts were mostly with officials. Mine were not. Oh, I had plenty of contacts with the Labor Ministry and the Social Affairs Ministry, but the great merit of the Labor Attaché's job was that you could reach out all over the country to the trade union or unions, as the case might be, or the Labor Ministry, the Social Affairs Ministry, the Education Ministry, if you chose as a Labor Attaché to do this.

I don't know whether other Labor Attachés did, but I did, and it expanded my contacts with the Israeli people. I also resumed my contacts with the Arabs whom I had known in my earlier incarnation. I had gotten to know, for example, in earlier times, the mayor of Nazareth, who was then of the Greek Orthodox religion. He was one of three brothers who were very well known in Nazareth and throughout Israel. Right after the 1948 war one of them became the official regional judge; another became the regional military supervisor for the Israeli government; and the third was the one I knew best. He was the youngest son, who had gotten a job in the newly established employment service in Nazareth. They had never had an employment service to help the Arabs before the [establishment of the] State and that was one of the things that the Labor Ministry did right away: It established employment service offices for Arabs throughout Israel.

I have always felt that Israel has never gotten the credit it deserves for all the extension of social services-Histadrut membership, employment service, medical services, etc.-to all those Arab communities. Israel never did a very good advertising job on that. I used to tell them that.

Anyway, where was I? I was back at the Embassy and how different it was from [my earlier work at] the Mission.

Q: How did your colleagues in the political section receive you?

PLUNKETT: Very well. I am surprised that there was so much emphasis in other [oral history] reports on how they were received as labor attachés. Of course, I expected that a woman would be downgraded and not paid much attention to. But it never happened, either at the Mission, or in Holland, or in the Embassy in Israel. Now, I don't know why that was the case, but I simply assumed that I was the same as everybody else on the staff, and nobody challenged me at all. Well, I wasn't shy about offering my views. I think that was an important part. My personality was such that I didn't hang back.

Anyway, we had a marvelous Ambassador in Israel at the time, Walworth Barbour. He was there for 12 years as Ambassador, and apparently he liked me right off. So he never set a tone of "this is just another secretary." I was always at the staff meetings. There was never any question about that. When I was retiring-I was beyond retirement age at the time-we had a very disagreeable Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM). The Ambassador was out of the country for a while when the processing of my retirement came up. I wrote a letter to the Ambassador saying that I would like an extension of six months. It would affect my pension. I had that all worked out. So since the Ambassador was away, my letter went to the DCM. And he said, "I'm not going to approve this. I'm going to have to retire much younger than what you're getting away with. I'm not going to approve it." I said "All right, give it back to me, and I'll wait until the Ambassador gets back, and I will submit it directly to him." So I did.

Q: It was a rather twisted way for him to judge the situation on the basis of his personal circumstances.

PLUNKETT: Yes, he was not a nice man. So anyway I sent the letter in to Ambassador Barbour and he took it and he rewrote parts of it. He said it was very important that I remain on the staff for another six months, that I was in the middle of certain things that he wanted to see finished. After that the poor old DCM treated me with kid gloves. He never once again said anything that was unfriendly. So, I thought that was good. After I retired and was living in Washington, he came back to the State Department in some capacity. Every year he used to have a reunion of people who had been on the staff in Israel and he always invited me. I thought that was very amusing.

Well, I did say that I kept in touch with the Arab community. This was very helpful because I also got to know some young men in the old city. I had done that when I was first there, and the Ambassador's secretary, who was a spunky little girl, had been in the habit of going over to the old city frequently, so she introduced me to the old city actually and to these young men she had come to know. She said, "They always used to say to me,`We're going to push those Israelis into the sea,' and she would say to them,`Yes, and in the meantime what are you going to do?' " They never succeeded in answering that.

In any case, it's a good time now to talk about the Histadrut. The Histadrut is, in the correct sense of the word, a unique institution in the world of labor unions. It began in 1920 when there was no state [of Israel], of course, and in a sense the Histadrut was a state. It not only was a trade union but the overall trade union. There were subdivisions as [there are] here, such as the plumbers as well as agricultural workers and the many other trades who were unionized there as well. Support of the unions came mostly from the agricultural settlements; they produced all the products at that time. So Histadrut developed the state. It really was a state. It developed the entire national health service, which was one of the outstanding aspects of Israel when it became a state. Israelis didn't have to worry, as we do, about how to set up a health service. It was there and covered every member of the Histadrut. Most of the people at that time were members, because of all the different advantages it offered. If they were a member of the trade union, they were entitled to a complete health service. Of course people complained about the service, just as we all do about our medical service, but it was a major part of the state's operations and the Histadrut was politically a very powerful organization.

Because, you see, after the 1948 war, the whole government had to be set up. Ben Gurion became the first Prime Minister and of course he had been very active in the building of the state. The Histadrut was such an important part of the society that it was of interest to us as well as just for its own functioning. It was a decisive organization in making state decisions and without the support of the Histadrut organization, the state would never have been able to develop.

So the first thing I had to do when I went to Israel the first time was to get in touch with the Histadrut personnel, the top dogs. The General Secretary of the Histadrut at that time was quite along in years at the time and he's long since dead. I found him a little stand-offish. His English was very inadequate and that may have been part of it. He married later a much younger woman who is now the Minister of Labor. I got to know her very well during my second incarnation there.

I was in very close touch with the Histadrut all through my five years as Labor Attaché. They were always forthcoming. They always discussed their internal problems, about which I could do nothing, but at least they kept me informed about what was going on.

Anyway, I'm anxious to convey an idea of the power of the trade union. It was an umbrella union. They had subdivisions by trade and so on, but I'm sure that the government never made a major move without consulting with the Histadrut. Unfortunately, to my way of thinking, the Histadrut has lost much of its power in the last ten years, because, as the state developed, it developed, for example, its own employment service. That was a function which the Histadrut had fulfilled before. It still has the health service, but there has been movement to "declassify" it, so to speak, and make it a national service rather than a trade union service.

The personalities involved in the Histadrut now have perhaps not been as good or as powerful as the earlier ones, and politics began to become an important part. Israel is very political. I've never seen or heard of a country that was so political. At one point there were 17 parties, but the Histadrut also had its own divisions; the Labor Party was the major party in Israel in my day. It was sort of a centrist party. Then it had a left wing. They didn't disagree; basically they all sort of worked together but they argued a good deal. Trust an Israeli to argue. As the saying goes, you put two Israelis together, and you have three arguments. But that to me was a pleasure, because I like to argue myself.

In any case the Histadrut is really *unique* in the world and I use that word advisedly. It commanded so much influence that the state really couldn't operate without it. Now in recent years this influence has been declining. Outside influences have been coming in; American, particularly. Well, of course, our government has given Israel billions over the years, and so we had influence there on what kind of economy they would be developing. I'm sorry myself that this is happening, but that is partly due to my own pro-labor prejudices.

Q: How much of this parallels the decline of unionism in other countries?

PLUNKETT: None. There is no parallel. Our AFL-CIO is not a parallel at all; of course, it does not have authority over its constituent unions. The Histadrut had authority over all of its constituent unions.

Q: Has its membership remained stable, or has it lost membership?

PLUNKETT: It has lost some. I don't know whether it's an actual loss or new people not joining it as they once did. There is a great movement for the State to take over the national health services. Well, you know how there are changes. We have them here of the same kind. Our AFL-CIO isn't nearly as powerful politically as it once was. And here I want to make a very strong point about the influence of the Histadrut on national development. I think that is the basic point and of course it was all set up in 1920, but it operated from 1920 to 1948 as kind of a state. It did everything. And it had even established a kind of pension system.

Oh that reminds me. After I retired, I wrote a pamphlet on the Histadrut. I was an ex-Cornellian and the people in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University asked me if I would prepare a document that would give them some information about the Histadrut. I did that. It was okayed by the State Department. The School of Industrial and Labor Relations printed it in its monthly bulletin, and this is one of my prides and joys: They duplicated it in 5000 copies to use in the Labor School. Of course, it is very much out of date now. What the Histadrut was when I wrote this is no longer what it is. So it is now an historical document! But that was one important thing, I thought, that came out of my whole service in Israel.

Q: Didn't you write the labor profile on Holland for the Labor Department?

PLUNKETT: Yes, oh yes, after I retired, I wrote the profiles on Holland, Israel, and Ireland, and I was in the middle of writing one on Belgium when the money was withdrawn. Oh, that was a dreadful thing. Actually, I had written half the project on Belgium when they called me from the office and said just drop your pen; we can't pay you for another minute. So that was all wasted, but I enjoyed my "post-graduate" service with the Labor Department.

Q: That's where we worked together.

PLUNKETT: That's right. Anyway, I want to make the point that possibly the most productive aspects of my work in Israel were the long-term contact with the Arab community and the publication of this really historical document about what the Histadrut used to be.

Q: Could you cite an example or two of your relations with the Arab community?

PLUNKETT: Well, yes. There was this young Nazareth Arab who was one of my early contacts. At that time we had what we called the Trainee Program. No Arab had ever been sent to the United States on a Trainee Program and I thought that would be a good idea. So I nominated him. He was in the Nazareth office of the employment service and it was kind of a casual, not a professional, service. I doubt whether the government paid an awful lot of attention to the offices in the Arab communities, because they were established after the state. But he was a very smart fellow, and the Mission resisted me greatly in trying to send an Arab to the states. I don't understand why.

There was no contact whatever with the Arab community before I came there. I'm speaking now of the early years when I was there with the Mission. My nominee came here and really made quite an impression. When he got back he made a speech somewhere and said "I am eternally grateful to my Government of Israel for giving me this opportunity." I was so pleased with that, because it showed some kind of a relationship with Israel. In those days it was hoped that what is happening now or what happened during the Intifada would never happen. I think it was never thought that it would. Anyway, he was the first and, as far as I know, the only Arab who was ever sent on a training program grant. It's kind of like "one woman" but no more.

Q: How about some more examples of your relations with the Arabs.

PLUNKETT: Oh yes, I became very friendly with the Muslim Mayor of Nazareth, and particularly with his wife who was a very intelligent woman and very outgoing. She was sent as a delegate to a number of conventions of women around the world. She was not one of those homebody Arab women at all. I used to see her fairly frequently. Frank Sinatra donated the funds to construct a building in Nazareth for the Histadrut. I went there fairly frequently and talked to groups of Arabs about this and that. Most of the people there in Nazareth spoke English. And of course George Kteily, the trainee, spoke

English. The Histadrut had an Arab section with an Arab at the head of it. I became very friendly with him. He lived in Haifa but came down to Tel Aviv to work. Once he invited me for a weekend to his house, and I went. He was a very nice man and quite intelligent. He was responsible for a number of my visits to Haifa and contacts with Arabs there.

I also developed good relations with the Technion, Israel's leading technical university in Haifa. It had a labor division and while I was still there in Israel, the Technion invited my cousin, Harry Van Arsdale, to a conference. He had come out of the famous Local 3 in New York of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW). They named a wing of the Technion building for Harry and in Silver Spring, Maryland, where the AFL-CIO labor school, The George Meany Labor Studies Center, is now located, there is a large bust of Harry right in the entrance hall. So that little boy in my childhood got to be an international labor leader, you see.

Anyway, where was I?

Q: You were winding up your discussion of your experiences in Israel and then I think you wanted to talk about your work in Holland.

PLUNKETT: Yes. I could go on probably for hours talking about that Israel experience because it was such an important one in my whole life. I have kept in touch with a number of Israelis, although I left there 25 years ago.

Well, let us now turn to Holland, which was my first appointment as a labor attaché. We had a kind of nondescript ambassador there when I arrived. He was soon replaced by one of the best: Bill Tyler. You may remember him. He was speaking Dutch, which he didn't know at all when he arrived, after six months on the job. I overheard him a number of times on the telephone when I was in his office. He would speak to the other person in perfectly fluent Dutch. He had an international background anyway. I think his father had been a business man in France for some time. His mother was European and he himself married an English woman and he retired in France.

Q: I've seen his name in a 1994 Foreign Service Association's register of retired people, so one may hope he's still around.

PLUNKETT: I keep thinking I must write to him. He's living in France and I have his address somewhere.

Anyway in its trade union aspects Holland was also a unique situation. The trade unions were divided up by religion. I don't know of any other country where that exists. There was the Catholic, the Protestant, and what they called the General Union, which was not connected with any religion, but substantially Socialist in its outlook. It was the biggest of the trade unions. But all these people, the general secretaries of each union, were very friendly. They may have had their own differences when they discussed policy, but it rarely came out in the open. They came out with united positions.

Now, there wasn't an overall umbrella union like the Histadrut. But it was a cooperative situation and that was my first experience as a labor attaché. I had to make my own way there. That is one of the great advantages of being a labor attaché. Nobody bothered you. You were not really responsible to anyone else, except the Ambassador, because nobody else knew anything about labor, and they weren't interested in it, but they were very friendly to me. In both places I participated in the economic section. After all, the labor situation had a good deal to do with the economic reports. Anyway, I plunged in and made the acquaintance right off the bat of the general secretaries of the three union groups.

The employers were divided up the same way [by confession]. The nursing service was divided the same way. If you needed a visiting nurse and you were a Catholic, you called the Catholic visiting nurse organization. Here is the funniest example: I lived in a big apartment building, a new, very nice place. I was the only American living in it. A very nice young Dutch woman lived across the hall from me. She spoke very good English and I became acquainted with her very soon. She said to me, "Now, if you want to go to the Protestant grocery store, you turn right when you leave the building, then turn left and go two blocks and there's the Protestant grocery. Now, if you want to go to the Catholic grocery," -- she didn't ask me if I had any religious affiliation -- "you turn left at the entrance to the building and walk three blocks toward the sea." -- I lived way out at the west end of the Hague. -- "and there you will find a Catholic grocery store."

The whole country was divided like that, and this, of course, astonished me. That has broken down over the years. After I left, the Catholic union and the so-called Socialist union combined. The Protestant union never did. The Protestants were the most devoted to their religious connection. In the trade union, they were perfectly lovely people, but they wouldn't unite with the others. That was, of course, a very singular situation. I had to deal with three different general secretaries of the unions, and I liked them all.

I still keep in touch with them, and when I was in Holland on a trip with my nephew in 1993, they all came to a party that I had set up for people I knew. I was very pleased. After all, I left Holland in 1967, when I transferred to Israel and this was 1993. And I had asked the woman who had been my assistant, a Dutch woman, to get in touch with as many people as she could that I had known. Do you know, there were 27 people who came to that cocktail party. We had a wonderful time.

Anyway, that religious division colored the whole business of contacts with the trade unions. In Holland I set up a practice that I continued later in Israel. It was to get the trade union people and the industrial people together. That first Ambassador couldn't understand the point. Nevertheless, every year I had a large reception for both in the library of the Embassy. When I went to Israel, I had it in my backyard, which was an enormous backyard. I invited the heads of the unions and the heads of some of their major subdivisions and various leading industrialists, plus members of the annual delegation of the AFL-CIO.

At one time the head of the Catholic miners' union invited me for a weekend down to the coal mine areas. And this was funny. They took me down into the coal mine and they dressed me up in a white garment and gave me a bath afterward because of all the coal dust. I went way down to the bottom of the coal mine. When I came up they took a picture of me in this outfit. I was all smudged with dust. That picture appeared in one of the issues of our Labor Department publication. Do you remember that?

Q: Oh, yes, I do remember that!

PLUNKETT: That was a famous picture. I think I still have my copy.

In any case, the Dutch trade unions were interested in "How do you do this?" and "How do you do that?" in the States. They were interested in getting ideas about what they should do in their own unions. I can't think offhand of anything specific that I feel was a real contribution, except that they all thought I was doing something important. At least they felt a much closer relationship to the United States.

One of the things that was important in my whole service as a labor attaché was setting up programs for visiting Americans. Congressmen and trade union leaders would come and that was very productive because by that time I had gotten to know a great many people that I could contact to help participate in their visits. And it wasn't only labor people or Congressmen. Industry people came. One man came who was a friend of my nephew, as a matter of fact. He was an industrialist, and he wanted to set up a branch in Holland. I forget what he made. He wrote and asked me if I could introduce him to people in the government and in the manufacturers' association. We often got firms started. So I did and that was a bit of a job, since it was out of my specialty. But he did set up this business, and he lived there himself for a couple of years, and the business became very successful. I kept in touch with him. Later in his life he was on the Cornell faculty. He is now retired.

One experience I had with an American industrialist was very unpleasant. He came and he was the representative of a big engineering company. In those days American companies were trying to come into European countries on business, and this man was trying to do that. The ambassador referred him to me. He came in and wanted to know about the labor situation. And then he said, "Tell me. These Dutch have so many labor regulations, and we don't want to follow them. Tell me how we can get around them." Well that made me mad, and I said, "I don't know how you can, but if I did know, I wouldn't tell you."

Q: Good!

PLUNKETT: He tipped his hat and left. I don't know what ever happened to him.

Q: You saved him from a lot of trouble.

PLUNKETT: Oh, I should say so. You know, the Dutch are so meticulous about everything. They soon would have gotten on to him, and then the Embassy would have been in trouble, because we would have been called on to defend him.

The one major problem we had with the Dutch was an economic problem. It was the "chicken war." Our chicken producers wanted to get changes in the Dutch regulations on the importation of chickens. Of course that is a big industry on the East Coast in Virginia and Delaware. It was eventually resolved. Our economic officer handled that, but we were also involved, because there was the general Embassy instruction, "If anybody contacts you about this, be sure to let us know." It was worked out and the Dutch agreed to raise the quotas. How could they help it? They can't defy the United States, or couldn't in those days. But, as far as I knew, that was really the only major intergovernmental problem while I was there.

Fortunately in both places where I served, relations with the United States were friendly. Of course, the Israelis always wanted more money than we were ready to give them, but we gave them plenty and still do. I have no objection to that. The Dutch situation was different from the Israeli situation, and they each had unique labor union situations. Who had ever heard of a country having a "three-pronged" labor union? Eventually the Socialist union-I think I've already said this-and the Catholic union combined. They were headed by very intelligent, attractive, youngish men.

I had a very funny experience with one Dutch trade union head, the Catholic one. The union headquarters was in Utrecht, and I was going up on my first visit to this fellow. He had given me the street address, and an Embassy car took me there. It was a big building. I said to the elevator operator, "I have an appointment with Mr. Coppes. Will you let me off where I am supposed to go?" Well, he let me off, and I walked into a kind of a big subdivided room and I said to the girl at the entrance, "I have an appointment with Mr. Coppes." She looked puzzled, but then she took me into an office where I guess the head guy was. He didn't speak much English, and so I explained to him who I was and so on. He looked at me puzzled and said, "Just a minute. I'll call somebody." So he called a young man in who spoke good English. And I told him I had come to see Mr. Coppes. He roared with laughter. He said this was the barbers' union, the "Coppers" union.

Mr. Coppes was the man's name, and the barbers union had an "r" in it. The elevator guy hadn't understood my pronunciation, and so there we were. Well, then he took me up to the office of Mr. Coppes and that was my first encounter with the Catholic trade union. Mr. Coppes took me to lunch. He was an awfully nice fellow, and he said, "Maybe you would like a little sherry before lunch?" And I said, "Thank you, no. I can't stand sherry, but I would enjoy an uer gineva. . ." That was the name of their gin. They had young gin and old gin. I said, "Young gin I don't care for, but old gin I would enjoy." He laughed and said, "I was going to order some of that myself!"

Q: What a great way to get acquainted.

PLUNKETT: We were friends forever. The Protestant union also had its headquarters in Utrecht. I can't complain about any of those people. I just didn't experience the difficulties others have alluded to. I may be obtuse but I don't remember any. As far as being a woman is concerned, I think there were many advantages. In the first place, you weren't in danger of being punched in the nose if you disagreed with them, and a man might well have that happen. You know, didn't that happen to one of our labor attachés in Cairo? He was attacked and very badly injured by some local guy. I forget his name, but he was brought back severely injured.

One rather disagreeable but enlightening experience I had in Holland was with a group in Europe interested in a labor meeting in the Hague. I attended the meeting as Labor Attaché and a young man from Sweden came and sat down at the lunch table with me and a couple of other men. He asked me who I was, and I told him I was the Labor Attaché at the American Embassy. He stared at me. "Oh," he said, "I suppose they thought they could appoint a woman because this country has a queen." [laughter] This was the only anti-female experience I had in all my years as a Labor Attaché.

Q: What did you say, Margaret?

PLUNKETT: I gave him a very big scowl and said, "I really think that isn't the question." He was a brash young snot. I think in the Scandinavian countries, the attitude of men toward women is rather more backward than it is in some other areas.

To repeat, I never really found any animosity toward me as a woman. They might not have liked some things I did, but they never expressed it. Both Ambassadors Bill Tyler and Wally Barbour were very friendly and very appreciative of what I was doing. Generally, I can say that in both experiences I tried to expand the relationship between the embassies and the trade union people, and the ministries of labor.

Q: Isn't it wonderful to have had that relationship and that experience?

PLUNKETT: Yes. The happiest years of my life were spent in this work, and I enjoyed all my working life with the government. But that was the case. I suppose part of it was because I was thinking to myself that here was a job that had never been offered to any other women and I was managing to do it satisfactorily.

Q: Well, we are now coming to the end of our discussion and I want to ask you to look ahead 30 years and think of graduate students who might look over [the transcript of] this conversation. What sort of advice or comments would you care to record for them?

PLUNKETT: Now, about the future. If the budget people don't kill it, I hope the labor attaché program will continue. I think that one of the things I learned is that, as the labor attaché expands his or her contacts, this makes a great difference. It creates a kind of personal friendliness toward the United States. The ordinary people out in the country

don't have any great connection with other governments, the US or others. Half the time or most of the time they don't know what an embassy does or why it exists. The labor attaché has the opportunity to connect with the ordinary people if he/she will take it.

Q: There are too few "she's."

PLUNKETT: Yes. The labor attaché has the opportunity to expand the real feeling of friendliness toward the United States among all kinds of people. You do things that they think are funny and that pleases them even more. Like if you use the wrong word. I did learn some Dutch, and I learned some Hebrew. Once in awhile I would use the wrong word. "Ha! Ha! Ha! You should have said *this*." [laughter] And that always created a bond. I think it's very important to continue this part of our Foreign Service.

Of course the political atmosphere of the world is changing so much now, and our relations with the eastern European countries are becoming closer. I really don't know whether we have any labor attachés in any of these new independent countries. Do we?

Q: Yes

PLUNKETT: Well, that's good. But, you see, we haven't had a labor attaché in a Communist country because we regarded the so-called trade unions there as agents of the government and there was no point. Anything they would tell you, you took with a grain of salt. So the breakdown of the Communist world has not only had an influence on our military and political relationships, but also on this kind of thing where you get to know the people better and they get to know you better.

Q: Exactly.

PLUNKETT: Yes, I think that's really so, and I hope it will develop. I'm afraid that the budget cutters may think that this is not an essential part of foreign relations. I think that would be a great mistake.

There's something else I wanted to say about the source of labor attachés. When I was in the service, I had close connections with the trade unions, the AFL-CIO. Through Harry Van Arsdale, I got to know George Meany very well. They were very close friends. Harry used to say that "Uncle George," as I called him, would call him up in the middle of the night to discuss something with him. And I had sponsorship, although not on my initiative, from people who headed some of the trade unions. Joe Beirne was one. He was such a nice man, and he sponsored me and Jim Carey.

Q: How about Joe Keenan? Do you remember him?

PLUNKETT: Not very well. And I was not really aware that this much union support was going on, but I'm sure now it was. As I got into the service in Holland, our consul in Amsterdam said to me once, "You know, you're getting along so well with our trade

union people because they know that you really have an interest in labor, unlike people who come out of the regular State career track." I think it's important. I noticed in Dan Horowitz' statement [for the Labor Diplomacy Oral History Project] that he didn't think it was so terribly important and that it was perfectly okay to take people out of the straight Foreign Service. I don't agree with him on that. I was interested in this consul's comment, that union people know instinctively if that strange person, the Labor Attaché, is what you might call "on their side."

Q: I see.

PLUNKETT: And I have never changed. I suppose you are supposed to change your mind when you get old, but I don't. Because I think what I think is all right!

Q: Good!

PLUNKETT: I wish I were still doing it. I hated to retire.

Q: What did you do after you stopped doing those Profiles for the Labor Department as a consultant? Anything in particular?

PLUNKETT: Let me see. I was there in the middle of this bone deterioration, which reduced my ability to get around. It wasn't anything like it is now, when it is a real handicap. But I moved. My nephew, who lives here in Minneapolis, was getting worried about my living alone in Washington. I had moved back there from Connecticut. He was still teaching at the University here, but he's retired, himself, now. He said, "I can't drop everything and rush off to Washington if you should need me. I wish you would consider coming out here to live." And he found this place. He spent a lot of time looking at different retirement homes, and I could see his point. I didn't really want to leave Washington. I had many friends there. I've been here ten years now. He's been very good to me. Very considerate. Every time there's something broken in my apartment, he comes and fixes it, and we go out to dinner one night a week. Now it's getting so I have great difficulty getting in and out of a car. It has to be managed. I can't take a taxi because they won't do the things they have to do.

When I first retired I moved to Southbury, Connecticut. There I was elected to the town council for two terms. I persuaded them to build a new town hall. They were in a terribly ramshackle place with not nearly enough room. In my first campaign for office I was at the top of the list of candidates. It's a beautiful town hall, and that was the contribution I made to Southbury. My name is on the brass plaque in the entrance hall with the names of the other members of the council when the town hall was built. I also taught public administration, part time, at the State College in Danbury for a couple of years

Q: You know, Margaret, I think we could go on indefinitely. But I wonder if this isn't wrapping it up now. We've had a beautiful conversation. Thank you ever so much for your contribution.

PLUNKETT: Well, you are very welcome. It has been a great pleasure.

End of interview