

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

MICHAEL J. VARGA

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 26th of June, 2014 with Michael J. Varga, V-A-R-G-A. And Michael was saying he was born -- you were born in Philadelphia, when?

VARGA: 1955.

Q: OK, and your family came over right after World War I?

VARGA: During World War I. *During* World War I. My father's family came to America during the First World War.

Q: Do you know how they got out of Hungary, I mean --

VARGA: I don't. I don't know that story.

Q: All right, well your grandfather was digging graves. Where does your mother come from and what's your background?

VARGA: My mother's family came from Italy. Her mother left the Calabria region of Italy sometime after the conclusion of World War I.

Q: And how did your parents meet?

VARGA: I don't remember. Maybe I knew it at one time, but I don't remember that.

Q: That's all right. Well, then what did your father do?

VARGA: My father was a supervisor for an electronics company most of his life, and my mother did some secretarial work. Mostly she was a stay-at-home housewife. Once the children were in school, my mother did some secretarial jobs.

Q: Again, in Philadelphia?

VARGA: Yes, in Philadelphia.

Q: So you grew up basically in Philadelphia.

VARGA: Yes, from birth until the age of 17 I was in Philadelphia.

Q: What do you recall -- what sort of neighborhood did you live in, and what was life like there?

VARGA: It was a typical middle class neighborhood: red brick houses on the outskirts of Philadelphia.

Q: And what was -- in Philadelphia at that time, what was the ethnic mix in your neighborhood?

VARGA: It was not very diverse. The ethnic mix in my neighborhood was, I would say, 99% white, with an occasional immigrant from some place, but was never very clear where. I mean they weren't Hispanic and they weren't obviously like the floods of immigrants coming to the country now. Usually it was somebody who had come from Europe somewhere. But mostly the neighborhood was Caucasian.

Q: Where did you go to school?

VARGA: I went -- well, this may be an interesting (*laughs*) story. My parents had sent my older brothers to an inner city Catholic high school in the center of Philadelphia. And so when it came time for me to go to high school there was a question in their minds about whether I was up to that urban environment. I knew that my brothers had gone to this urban high school, so I pleaded with them that I should go to the same school that they had gone to. And ultimately, that's where I went. And it was a life changing

experience, because of course in the middle of Philadelphia in an urban environment during the late '60s and early '70s, the ethnic mix was quite different. I would say in my high school probably 60% of the students -- no, maybe 50% -- 50% of the students were African American, and 40 % were Caucasian. The other 10% were Asian and Hispanic.

Q: Well, how did it work? I mean sort of student wise, this mix?

VARGA: For the most part everybody seemed to get along, although this was the 1960s and Frank Rizzo was the Mayor of Philadelphia. He was known unfortunately for a certain brutal stance among the Philadelphia Police. So there were race riots in Philadelphia at that time. And in fact I remember one day when some kind of a riot broke out in inner city Philadelphia, and the students at my high school started fighting. And we had police and police dogs wandering through the high school, and we were dismissed and sent home early. And when we left school we had to (*laughs*) run to avoid the police dogs.

Q: Oh boy.

VARGA: (*laughs*)

Q: Well, let's go back to grammar school. Were you much of a reader?

VARGA: Yes, I was. I was a reader in grammar school, and I was even a writer back then. I remember writing some essays. I went to a small Catholic elementary school where I was taught by nuns. I received a number of prizes for my writing and I was invited to read my work in front of the class. And that sort of led to my thinking I could become a writer. Which is what I've done, especially since I've retired. But it all started when I was young and that positive affirmation I was getting from those nuns in elementary school.

Q: Well, how was the elementary school? You know, one hears stories about nuns rapping you with rulers on the knuckles and all that.

VARGA: Yes. I'm afraid in my case many of those stories are true. The nuns were quite hard on us, the discipline was quite intense, and if you stepped out of line corporal punishment was the norm back then. This was the 1960s and people seemed to think it was OK to spank students and hit them with rulers and things like that. So yes, I'm a product of that kind of discipline and education.

Q: Were you much of a student?

VARGA: I was a very good student. I got very good grades and did exceptionally well in grade school.

Q: You say you're a reader. What was some of your reading? Did you have sort of favorite books, do you recall? Early on?

VARGA: Well, I don't think I was very erudite in the sense of knowing a lot about literature or anything. In grade school the common thing to be reading was Hardy Boys mysteries and that kind of thing, and that's really what I remember from that period.

Q: In your neighborhood, was this sort of the place where all the kids got out in the street and played? I'm not talking about, you know, gang stuff, I mean that was where you played, or did you go elsewhere?

VARGA: Yes. When you got home from school generally the parents didn't require you to do your homework right away, so all of the neighborhood kids would gather outside our houses and ride bikes together around the neighborhood or go to the nearby park and hit a baseball around. That sort of pretty traditional American middle class kind of recreational activities after school.

Q: Movies? Were you much of a movie buff?

VARGA: No, not really. When I was in seventh grade my parents thought it was time for me to get a job. I had been delivering newspapers for a few years, and that wasn't generating much income and we didn't have a lot of money in the house. So I remember the summer of seventh grade my parents said, "It's time for you to work, to get a job." And I went to the nearby movie theater and I was hired as an usher at the movie theater for 90 cents an hour.

Q: Ah!

VARGA: And that was my first job. And I did that for probably six or nine months, and then I'd had enough. My next job was preparing chicken at a fast food place to earn more money. Better than 90 cents an hour.

Q: Oh boy. Yeah, well you got to start somewhere.

VARGA: Yes. I was delighted. And the great perk that came from being an usher in the movie theater of course is that you got to see all these first run movies without having to pay for them. So even though the wage was very low, at 90 cents, I mean there was that benefit of getting to see six months of movies when they first came out. That was wonderful (*laughs*). In addition, since you heard the lines so many times during a given week, you could generally repeat all of the lines by the end of the run. I used to know all the lines to movies like *Klute*, with Jane Fonda, or *I Never Sang For My Father* with Gene Hackman. Great fun, learning how great dialogue is put together. I think it influenced my later writing of plays and short stories.

Q: Oh yes. Well, I've always been a great movie buff.

VARGA: Uh-huh.

Q: Well, in high school, what were your favorite subjects?

VARGA: I was very good in English, and also I studied French and Latin at this Catholic high school, and I seemed to have a knack for languages, which later would play a role in my adult life. I was the editor of the school newspaper my senior year and I was one of the contributing editors to the school yearbook, so I had my hand in anything that was being published at the school.

Q: While you were in high school did foreign affairs grab you at all?

VARGA: It did. We had a radio program at this Catholic high school where eight of us students would rotate in a discussion weekly on a Philadelphia classical music station. They would give us a half hour of time to have a public affairs discussion. And so you had to be up on the latest news to have meaningful comments on the radio. And I participated in that. It forced me to be much more aware outside of Philadelphia of what was going on in the world to be able to speak knowledgeably about these things.

Q: You went to high school from when to when?

VARGA: From 1969 to 1973.

Q: Well, how -- although you were too young to be particularly involved -- how did the Vietnam War and our participation in it strike you at the time?

VARGA: My eldest brother was drafted and went to Vietnam. And so I was very aware of the way the Vietnam War could impact a family as it was impacting my own. Suddenly my elder brother was no longer around and he was in Vietnam. And fortunately he wasn't wounded or anything and came back from his military service OK. But it also made me aware that I was not cut out for the military. I didn't think I had the military disposition. So even then I was looking into other options if I were to be drafted. At that time there were provisions about perhaps being able to avoid the draft if you joined the Peace Corps. I'm not sure that was ever actually true. But it was something that goaded me then to find out about the Peace Corps, and ultimately I went in the Peace Corps, which would later lead to my foreign affairs career.

Q: Well, you graduated from high school when?

VARGA: In 1973.

Q: And where'd you go -- did you go to college?

VARGA: I did. I went to a school in New Jersey called Rider College at that time. Today it's a university so it's called Rider University, that's R-I-D-E-R.

Q: What was it like?

VARGA: It was a pretty typical liberal arts business campus outside of Trenton, New Jersey. And I studied journalism and I got a certificate as a secondary education English teacher while I was there.

Q: Was it pretty much a commuter college?

VARGA: No, I'd say half and half. Maybe half the students commuted, and they had dormitories on campus that housed the rest of us. And I got a scholarship to Rider. And I was a resident student. And in fact, during my second and third years in college I was first a resident assistant and then a resident supervisor in the dormitory. So that's how I earned money when I was in college.

Q: What was the student body like?

VARGA: I'd say 75% typical Caucasian Americans, 10 % African-American, and 15% foreign students. Not a terribly diverse student body at that.

Q: During the time both when you were in high school and at college, what was your view of -- what were you getting about the Cold War?

VARGA: I guess I was pretty typical of that time in the sense that the Soviet Union was this world power that was a serious threat. You just grew up with this mentality that at any moment someone could hit the wrong button and a nuclear missile could come our way. And we of course were trained about putting our heads under desks and things like that when I was in elementary school and high school. So there was fear of the Soviet Union. The Cold War was very real to us.

Q: Did you find you were following any country, maybe Hungary or anything more closely because of -- or Italy -- because of family connections?

VARGA: Yes. Because of my ethnic background I seemed to have a greater interest in following what was happening in Europe. I paid more attention probably to that area of the world than any other.

Q: Did you get, during your college years or even before, any travel outside of the United States or particularly in the United States?

VARGA: No. No. I'm afraid I was quite sheltered. My family really didn't have means. Today I think we would have qualified as low income, as opposed to middle class or middle income. There was no excess money for any travel. I never had been outside the

United States and really never traveled much within the United States. That would all come after I would complete college. And part of the motivation for joining the Peace Corps was an opportunity to see some of the world I was hearing about, but knew I would probably never see on my own.

Q: Well, what was Philadelphia like as sort of a focal point?

VARGA: It was a typical city. I don't really think there was anything remarkable about being from Philadelphia. In terms of being more aware about the rest of the world, I was aware that the city was twinned with a number of cities around the world, but even that was just a hazy kind of awareness that the city was paired with these cities in other places. But it didn't really spur me to find out more about those cities.

Q: When you graduated, you had a degree in what, journalism?

VARGA: Actually, my degree is in English with a certificate in secondary education.

Q: And what were you planning to do with it?

VARGA: I was going to be a high school English teacher. That was the plan. And because of my earlier research into the Peace Corps and my concern over being compelled to do military service through the draft, I was thinking about teaching abroad in the Peace Corps. But then during my junior year in college they ended the military draft. And so there wasn't that pressure anymore of worrying about the draft and the Vietnam War. So the research I'd done in the Peace Corps had spurred me to think, "Well, I still want to do the Peace Corps." So three weeks after I graduated from Rider, I was in the capital of Chad in the middle of Africa as a trainee in the Peace Corps.

Q: Well, how did you find the training for the Peace Corps? Where did it take place and what were they doing with you?

VARGA: The training had two aspects to it. It was done in the capital of Chad, which is called N'djamena. And the primary goal of the training was for language training. Chad is a former French colony and so to function in Chadian society you had to be somewhat fluent in French to be able to lead your daily life. So there was a lot of emphasis on getting your French speaking ability up to a good level. And then of course, I was hired by the Peace Corps as an English teacher there in Chad. So they were teaching us different strategies, educational strategies, about how you teach in that kind of an environment when you're trying to teach English as a second language or English as a foreign language.

Q: Well, had you had any French before?

VARGA: Yes. I'd had French in high school and was pretty good at it in terms of writing and knowing the grammar, but I had not really been forced to speak it. It was very good

at the Peace Corps training there in the capital of Chad; they required us to speak French during blocks of time. You weren't able to speak any English at all during whole blocks of time, and it forced us to become quite fluent in French. So that by the end of the training I think all of the volunteers felt very good about their ability to communicate in French.

Q: Well, what were your first impressions of Chad?

VARGA: I would say I was a little bit shocked upon arrival at Chad because I didn't have a sense of the level of poverty that many other countries apparently took as their normal status quo. Chad was a very poor country and people were very, very hungry most of the time. And I had grown up in an America where generally in my life if you were hungry you could always go to the store and buy something to eat. But in Chad, even if you had money, there were times, particularly during the dry season, when there was nothing to buy. There was nothing to eat. You just had to survive.

Q: Well, how did you survive? And how did the Chadians survive?

VARGA: Fortunately in Chad they have their tribal communities, so even if one individual is suffering and doesn't have the resources or doesn't have access to food, the tribe takes it as their responsibility to look after its members, so they make sure nobody starves and they share the little food they have. And, and that's how the Chadians survive. And they do well at it. I was quite impressed with that whole tribal aspect. I didn't grow up in America with that level of affiliation with a tribe so to speak. I had my family, but in Africa it's much stronger, the idea that you're part of this much larger community that's linked together by some ethnic connection. And that was a revelation to me.

Q: Where did you teach?

VARGA: I was sent to a village at the very southern part of Chad, very close to the Central African Empire and Cameroon. The name of the village was Baibokoum. And I was the only Peace Corps volunteer sent to that post. It was a very remote village. And so, I wasn't sure I was going to see any westerners for the whole two years that I was in the village, because it was so isolated and the roads were so bad between Baibokoum and other places that people had difficulty traveling to that village. I had no running water, no electricity. I lived a very basic existence.

Q: Well, what tribes lived near you? I assume Chad was split to a certain extent among various tribal groups.

VARGA: There were multiple tribes there in Baibokoum, because it shared the border with Cameroon and the Central African Empire. There were multiple tribes existing in that area. So it wasn't just one tribal group. But they were typically animists. They believe that everything has a soul and everything that exists in the world is sacred and needs to be treated with respect. They were poor, but they didn't let their poverty affect

their disposition. They were very happy people; they were singing all the time. The two main crops in Chad are peanuts and cotton. And most of the people farmed the land and produced harvests of peanuts or cotton, which were then sold to the government at fixed rates. And that's how they earned the meager incomes they had.

Q: Well, how did you find teaching?

VARGA: I found it quite challenging because I was used to class sizes in the United States of maybe 30, 35 students. In my classes in Chad I generally had maybe 50, maybe 60, and in some cases as many as 80 students in a class. And because girls were married off at an early age, almost all the students were boys. So that was kind of a different environment for me. If you have an interest in my service in the Peace Corps in Chad, the Peace Corps actually has a slide show on its website about my service in Chad, which is called "Africa Colors a Destiny." And if you Google that title, "Africa Colors a Destiny," you usually get the link to the slide show that the Peace Corps maintains.

Q: "Africa Colors a Destiny?"

VARGA: Right, "Africa Colors a Destiny." Also, I expect to publish a fictional account, a novel, later this year based on some of my Peace Corps experiences. It's titled "Under Chad's Spell" and if you Google that you should get the link to purchase it on Amazon. I also have my own website, www.michaelvarga.com.

Q: I'm writing this down. Well, how did you find you were received there?

VARGA: I was the only white person in this village. So I was kind of an oddity. The Africans looked at me with some wonderment: "Well, why is this white man here?" But because I was so unique being the only white person, I was treated with a great deal of deference and a great deal of respect. And I was received very graciously in their Chadian huts and they shared their meager resources with me willingly and they were very kind to me.

Q: How did you do at the local language?

VARGA: I learned some of the local language, but basically I functioned in French. I learned some basic Arabic as well because there was a certain percentage of the population that was Muslim who functioned in Arabic. So you had to be sort of multilingual there, functioning in French, Arabic, the local African tongues, and with your students you wanted them to practice with you in English.

Q: Well, how did you stand with the Muslim community and all at that time? Was it a threat, or what?

VARGA: No. I mean we didn't have the sense that we do today in 2014 of radical approaches to Islamic belief. Everybody seemed to be much more non-threatening at that

time. The Chadian government in the 1970s was heavily supported by France, being a former French colony. And in the northern part of Chad the Islamic population that dominated the north was not happy with the Western-leanings of the government. So there were always rumblings in Chad about potential coups against the government brought by the Islamists who predominated in northern Chad. So there was a certain level of political instability in Chad during that time. But since I was in a village in the far south, I would hear about these things, but I wouldn't see them in daily life. I wouldn't see any threat in daily life. But you'd hear about some attack in a northern town where some Islamic rebels had taken over some government building, something like that.

And ultimately my Peace Corps service ended because in February of 1979 civil war did break out in Chad and the American ambassador decided that it was too dangerous for all U.S. government personnel to remain in the country. So all Peace Corps volunteers were evacuated at that time from Chad. And we were never able to return.

Q: Well, how did you -- did you have any feeling about -- you mentioned the Central African Republic. Bokassa was doing his thing --

VARGA: Right.

Q: -- at that time. Did he pose any problems or threats where you were?

VARGA: No, we didn't have an awareness that there was any threat coming to us from Bokassa and the Central African Empire. There was just a sense that just as Chad had some political instability, that country also had a certain level of political instability, but it didn't seem to be impacting us as Peace Corps volunteers.

Q: Well, did you feel that you had to be very careful not to be accused of trying to foment change and all?

VARGA: No. There was no -- at least in my recollection, I don't remember any sort of pressure about that. The emphasis was on the jobs that we were doing. There were well diggers in Chad who were digging wells in various villages that didn't have access to water. And that was considered a very positive development for Chadians to be able to have clean water in some places where they didn't before. And we English teachers, we often were pressed into service to teach other things because the Chadian teachers were often striking because they weren't being paid. So even for a time I was teaching French and mathematics at my high school because the regular Chadian teachers were on strike. Overall, it was a very positive experience, but you always had the sense that the government wasn't quite on the firmest foundation.

Q: Did you have experience with the northern Muslims who were traveling in pickup trucks and all, carrying on sort of what used to be called the Toyota Wars. Were they going on?

VARGA: They may have been in the northern part of the country, but as I was in this village in the far south I did not see any evidence of that.

Q: Did the embassy pay much or any attention to you -- I mean what you were up to?

VARGA: No. I had almost no contact with the American embassy and maybe twice during the 21 months I was in Chad did a political officer or somebody from the embassy come through my village and spent maybe a half hour chatting with me about the local conditions. But then they hit the road and I didn't see anybody from the embassy again.

Q: Well, did the Peace Corps give you any equivalent to R&R (rest and relaxation)?

VARGA: During the summer months when the school year was not in session you were encouraged to do some traveling on the African continent if you had saved up some money. I was pressed into service during 1978, during that summer, to train the new crew of Peace Corps volunteers that arrived that summer. So I did a little traveling, but I spent most of that summer in N'Djamena training the new volunteers.

Q: Well, as you were sitting in this village, did you think, "What next for Michael?"

VARGA: Yes, I did. Of course, I thought about it. And in fact, at one point during one of those brief conversations I had with an embassy officer he was asking me about ways that life could be improved in the village. And I reeled off a couple ideas I had, but he didn't seem to pay any attention to what I was saying. And I wound up leaving the Peace Corps at the end of my tour with the sense that to be taken seriously in terms of development work I needed a better credential than just a secondary education degree in English. And so ultimately that's what spurred me to go to graduate school when I came back to the United States, and I earned a master's degree in Development Economics from the University Of Notre Dame.

Q: Well, how did you -- Notre Dame of course is not only a football power, but it's certainly a major educational institution. How did you find it there?

VARGA: I liked it. Because I had been raised Catholic it seemed natural for me to apply to Notre Dame. I was delighted when they offered me essentially a fellowship that would cover all the costs of graduate school for me to complete a degree there. They valued highly my having done the Peace Corps. My Peace Corps service seemed to convince Notre Dame that I was somebody worth investing in. And they gave me a fellowship to attend graduate school there.

Q: Well, how did you find the approach towards development and all at Notre Dame? What was your professors' approach?

VARGA: You had a range of professors, so you had the whole spectrum of economic theory being taught. You had some professors who were more inclined to be teaching that

development, especially in the way it evolved in developed western economies, had to have a certain emphasis on assisting the lesser developed nations catch up, get up to speed with the rest of the developed world. The developing countries needed more advantages, more assistance in terms of competing in global markets with the developed nations. But you also had some professors who are what are called neo-classical economists who taught a very strict market based theory of economy and who didn't believe in any interventions to assist in any special way as economic agents, but let the markets work, let the market serve as the way that people could better their lives. So you got the whole range of economic theory there at Notre Dame. That helped me understand the broad spectrum of economics.

Q: Did Notre Dame have any abroad programs, particularly your department?

VARGA: They probably did, but even though I had that fellowship to do graduate school, I had no excess money. I was working a part-time job when I was in graduate school, but that was just helping me to feed myself. And I couldn't afford any sort of abroad travel.

Q: Well, so what were you thinking about when you got out?

VARGA: Well, oddly enough, I took the Foreign Service Exam just prior to starting at Notre Dame. Before starting at Notre Dame, I had been taking some economic courses at a community college, and I saw a notice about the Foreign Service Exam. And a friend of mine was planning to take it, and he said, "Michael, you should take it too." And I really didn't think about the Foreign Service that much. As I said, while I was in the Peace Corps I didn't have that much contact with the embassy folks. On a whim I did take the Foreign Service Exam. And fortunately enough I passed it, and a few months later, once I'd started graduate school at Notre Dame, they called me for the oral exam and I passed that. And over the next few years they said they were doing my background security investigations because they had to talk to people who had known me in Chad in the Peace Corps. And so just as I was finishing up my master's degree, the State Department called and said, "OK, we've completed all the background investigations for you and we reached your name on the list based on how you performed on the written exam, so we have a job for you if you're interested." And so the timing couldn't have been better. I was finishing up at Notre Dame and the State Department was calling.

Q: Ah! Well, do you recall any of the questions on the oral exam?

VARGA: The only question that has stayed with me all these years is at one point somebody said to me, "Explain the expansion of the United States from colonial times to the present based on agriculture."

And that kind of threw me for a second. I remember answering something about, "Well, as the population grew, people needed more land to farm to feed the growing population and so it was natural that they would keep wanting to expand the territory of the United States." And that seemed to satisfy whoever had posed the question.

Q: Yeah.

VARGA: But that's the only question I remember.

Q: Well, when did you get -- when were you told you had passed?

VARGA: I was told I'd passed the exam in 1983, which was when I was just beginning graduate school at Notre Dame. But they didn't come back to me until June of 1985. That's when they said all the clearances had been met and the background investigation had been completed. And so it was in June of '85 that they offered me a job in the State Department.

Q: So what were you doing in between time?

VARGA: Well, that's when I was in graduate school at Notre Dame, from '83 to '85.

Q: So the timing couldn't have been better.

VARGA: It was absolutely perfect. And you know, to people who believe in divine providence you'd almost say, "OK, here's the plan, it's quite obvious what's happening here. You have to follow what the signs are telling you."

Q: Yeah. OK, so you came, you took an A100 course?

VARGA: Yes. I was in the 28th class for the A100 course after the Foreign Service Act of 1980. And so during that summer of 1985 I completed the A100 course and by October I was off to my first assignment in Dubai as a vice consul with responsibility basically for the consular function at Dubai.

Q: Well, let's talk a bit about the A100 course. What was your class like? Composition, male/female, minorities, education?

VARGA: I would say it seemed about 50/50 male and female, minorities I'd say there were about 15 to 20% minority. I would say age-wise there seemed to be a number of us who were in our late twenties, and then the greatest majority of people seemed to be in their early twenties. There were a couple in our class who were older entrants. Maybe they were in their forties. But there were just a couple of them. The class was about I'd say maybe 40 people. I could be wrong about that number. But in my recollection it seems about 40.

Q: Did you have any Vietnam veterans?

VARGA: I don't recall any. There may have been, but I don't --

Q: But it didn't stick in your mind as being --

VARGA: No.

Q: Did you have the feeling that they were trying to indoctrinate you, or just get you to understand the system?

VARGA: No, I didn't have any sense of being indoctrinated. The emphasis seemed to be on learning the ropes of navigating the bureaucracy. Beyond that, since for our first assignments almost all of us were going out to consular assignments, there was a sense that you needed to succeed in the consular training so that you could function well out in the field. And so there was very serious training for consular work. Memorizing relevant sections of the Foreign Affairs Manual, the FAM, as we called it. It was very professional and very effective. The running joke during our training was, whenever a question arose about anything—sports, history, the arts—someone would say, “I work with an open FAM.”

Q: And did you want to go back to Africa?

VARGA: I felt that since I spoke French, and I just spent two years in Africa speaking French daily, and my French was very good, so when they asked about our first assignments I put in for all French speaking posts and I thought it would be natural for the State Department to send me to a French speaking post. And I was quite shocked when they said, “No, we're sending you to Dubai,” *(laughs)*.

Q: All right, I, I knew Dubai back in the 1950s.

VARGA: Ah-ha.

Q: When I was in Dhahran. And we covered Bahrain, Qatar, and, at that time the Trucial States, including --

VARGA: Right.

Q: -- including Dubai.

VARGA: Right.

Q: But what was Dubai like when you were there?

VARGA: Well, Dubai was obviously not the big chic place that people talk of today. It seemed to be a city that really functioned almost primarily, in terms of the economics of the city, on its trade with Iran. And the whole city seemed to be focused on the relationship with Iran. And of course the hostage crisis with the United States had happened in '79 and I was there in '85. So it was only six years after the hostage crisis.

And so, relations with Iran weren't very good. And yet, at the consulate almost all the visa applicants were Iranians, flying in from various cities in Iran to Dubai and coming directly from the airport to the consulate and lining up for an American visa.

Q: What --

VARGA: So that was a little bit overwhelming, to deal with hundreds of applicants daily and I was the only consular officer at post.

Q: So what were the instructions regarding Iranian applicants' visas?

VARGA: I was encouraged to be quite strict, quite tough with all visa applicants because of the 214-B provision in the law that said a visa applicant is presumed to be an intending immigrant, and they have the burden to prove otherwise. And so, because all these folks were coming from Iran and presenting documents about their residency in Iran, none of which I could check on because there was no way to know whether these documents were legitimate or not, my refusal rate was quite high. And they used to joke in Dubai that the United States was the great Satan. But they had a nickname for me. I had a little goatee beard and they used to call me "Shatan Kuchek" which in Farsi means "the Little Devil."

Q: (laughs) Did it bother you that you were caught in this refusal mode?

VARGA: No, it didn't. Because this was the mid-'80s and the hostage crisis was still fresh in many Americans' minds, including my own, and there were a lot of demonstrations in Tehran even then where a lot of Iranians were saying, "Marg Bar Amrika," you know, "Death to America." And that was very common at that time. So I didn't have any problem with a high refusal rate for the visas.

Q: Yeah. It's -- I -- my last job overseas was in Naples.

VARGA: Uh-huh.

Q: And after the hostage crisis had just finished. And we were getting a number of students and all coming around shopping, trying to get visas. And we were pretty hostile. This is --

VARGA: Yeah.

Q: We weren't very understanding.

VARGA: Sure.

Q: Who was your ambassador?

VARGA: When I first arrived in Dubai it was a man by the name of Lumsden who was the ambassador. Then by the time I finished my tour in Dubai it was David Mack.

Q: Ah-ha. Yeah, I've interviewed David.

VARGA: Uh-huh.

Q: What was Dubai like at that time?

VARGA: It seemed very prosperous. I mean it was politically stable, economically seemed to be thriving. Of course the greatest majority of people you'd see in Dubai were third country nationals who were employed in building all these construction projects that you saw around Dubai. But I understand from people who have visited Dubai in recent years that it looks much different than when I was there in '85 to '87. So I guess there may even be more third country nationals employed there now.

Q: When you say third country nationals, where were they coming from?

VARGA: Mostly from Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka.

Q: Were many of them applying for visas?

VARGA: Yes, many of them were applying for visas as well. And unfortunately, my refusal rate for them was just as high as the Iranians because they were often presenting documents that to me didn't show that they were not intending immigrants to the United States, so I had no qualms about refusing many of them.

Q: Well, did you get any chance to get involved in the politics of the area, or was there much in the way of politics?

VARGA: I did a fair amount of political reporting because the U.S. was very interested in any information on what was going on inside Iran. And here I had this flood of Iranians coming through my visa window every day. So I did get involved with some of the political analysis that was going on about the situation in Iran, and in fact I earned a number of kudos cables during that time period. They meant a lot to me because I was kind of overwhelmed dealing with hundreds of visa applicants daily and finding time to do political reporting as well during my first tour seemed exceptional.

Q: Well, did you have much contact with people in the area? I mean other than work?

VARGA: I immersed myself in life in Dubai. All my friends were local folks, and I didn't spend a lot of time with the Americans there in Dubai. I spent most of my time with the Emirati and a lot of Iranians too.

Q: How did the expatriate Iranians feel towards developments in their country?

VARGA: A lot of them had fled Iran after the Khomeini revolution. So they were quite -- at that time they were quite negative about the Mullahs having taken over the Iranian government. And so they were quite vehement in their critique of Iran at that time.

Q: Were they overt, or was this sort of among themselves, or what?

VARGA: Mostly among themselves. It was common knowledge in Dubai that the Iranian government, because of the strong economic connections between Iran and Dubai--it was common knowledge that there were plenty of "watchers" for the Iranian government there in Dubai. So they were quite circumspect in making critiques of the Iranian government in public. They wouldn't share their honest appraisals openly. But when you were in someone's home for a dinner they were quite open about their critiques. But walking around the streets of Dubai they weren't likely to say anything publicly about the situation in Iran.

Q: What was your feeling about the government of Dubai? Was it responsive?

VARGA: No, it didn't seem to pay much attention to the people in Dubai. At that time the ruler of Dubai was named Sheikh Rashid, and he was believed to be in a coma. The government never was admitting what his true situation was regarding his health. There was a sense that nobody knew what was really going on, except for insiders within the government. So the government seemed very disconnected from the day-to-day reality of life in Dubai.

Q: What was going on oil-wise at that time?

VARGA: I don't remember much about oil at that time. The Iran-Iraq War was occurring during those years. So the great emphasis was on protecting U.S. freighters in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq War. In fact, at one point during my time in Dubai I had to go to one of the northern emirates because an American flag vessel had been boarded by the Iranian navy and the U.S. government was concerned whether the crew had been abused while it was under the control of the Iranian navy. So I was the point person who drove up from Dubai to the northern emirate to interview the crew about how they'd been treated by the Iranian navy.

Q: And how had they been treated?

VARGA: Fortunately the crew said that they had not been mistreated, that the navy had held the vessel for a couple of hours and then let it go. But it was all part of this chess game that was going on between Iran and Iraq in their ongoing war, and the Persian Gulf was just the playing field on which they were trying to play tit for tat among different vessels that were cruising through the Gulf.

Q: Did you feel any particular pressure of that war in your daily life?

VARGA: I can say one of the things I was a little bit shocked by of course was subsequently when all the information came out about the Iran Contra Affair during the Reagan administration. We had been making demarches about weapons getting into the hands of the Iranians, because of all that trade between Dubai and Iran.

Q: Yeah.

VARGA: We had to make demarches on a regular basis about trying to impede the flow of weapons to Iran. And only later when the Iran Contra Affair was revealed, it became clear that people in the White House were conducting these off-the-books operations behind the scenes. So I was a little bit chagrined, shall I say, in terms of being part of the U.S. government to discover that that had all been going on. Made us all look like hypocrites. Those of us doing yeoman's work out in the field.

Q: It was not a great moment in American diplomacy.

VARGA: Right.

Q: Well, as you were doing this, did you have any feel for what you wanted to do next?

VARGA: I did. I wanted to go to a French speaking African/Arab country if I could. Because again, I thought my French speaking ability was a great skill that I had and I didn't want to lose it. So I bid on assignments in French speaking northern African posts, mostly Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. And I was assigned to the consulate in Casablanca as my next assignment. But as I was preparing to go to Casablanca I got a call from the State Department saying they had an emergency in Damascus, that the consul there needed to be medevaced for a personal problem, and was I willing to delay my arrival in Casablanca and go to Damascus for a few months and run the Consular Section at the embassy there. And so that's what I actually did next. I went to Damascus.

Q: Oh. OK, you were in Damascus when?

VARGA: Was just for some months in 1987. I'm not sure how many months I was there. It might have been three or four.

Q: Well, what sort of situation -- how did Damascus strike you?

VARGA: Well, it seemed much poorer than Dubai. One thing I'll remember is shaving in the dark in Damascus, because the electricity was only on a limited number of hours per day in Damascus. And unfortunately, when I would have to go to the consulate in the morning, these were the hours when the electricity wasn't available. So I was shaving by candlelight in Damascus.

Q: (laughs) Well, who was the ambassador when you were there?

VARGA: The U.S. had withdrawn the ambassador then because of a hitch in the bilateral relationship. The ambassador's residence was vacant. When I first arrived in Damascus that's where they housed me. So the DCM was the acting ambassador or chargé d'affaires. And I think his name was David Ransom, if I remember correctly.

Q: Yeah, I think he was there. I've interviewed him. How would you describe relations with the country?

VARGA: They were tense. I was managing the Consular Section, and like Dubai we had a very challenging situation in Damascus with Iranians, Syrians, and Lebanese all coming to the consulate in Damascus for their visas, and there was no order to how they were lining up for visas. So one of the things I had to implement when I first arrived there was some system in coordinating the different nationalities. Since we were in Syria the Syrians had to have access to the consular services, so I had to separate out in different lines Syrians, Lebanese, and Iranians, and try to be fair to all three populations in terms of running the consulate. I was followed by the "mukhabarat" (the secret police) when I was there. They were not very good at their jobs, because I was aware that they were following me. But that just seemed to come with the territory. So I didn't let it change the way I did my job or manage my life. But it was tense.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Syrians?

VARGA: No.

Q: People?

VARGA: I didn't in Syria, only with our Syrian nationals who were working at the embassy. Relations with everyday Syrians seemed quite prescribed and when Syrians -- when you'd meet Syrians in the souk or some place and they found out you were an American there was a certain aloofness that did not seem to generate a lot of camaraderie, if you will, or closeness. At least that's the way I felt. But again, I was only there for a few months. So my judgments should be couched in those terms.

Q: OK, well then you moved -- did you go to Casablanca?

VARGA: Yes, I went to Casablanca for two years as the economic officer and that was a great assignment. I loved working there. Finally, as a person with a master's degree in development economics the U.S. government was putting my skills to use, I felt. So it was a wonderful assignment. I was getting to use my French that I'd perfected in Chad, I was using my economics degree that I'd gotten from Notre Dame. So it was an ideal situation and I liked it very much.

Q: All right, how did Casablanca strike you? I mean I've seen the movie, but I assume it was a bit different.

VARGA: Yes. It's a shock to see Casablanca. We all have those notions in our head of this idealized city from the movies. Casablanca's a big overcrowded city and Hassan II who was the king when I was there was not spending a lot of money to maintain the city. So there were a lot of problems with the city, a lot of developments seemed to have been stopped mid-course. The tax laws were such that people got a benefit if they started a construction project. And so all over town you saw these half constructed residences and businesses because people didn't want to give up their tax advantages by completing the building. So they would leave all these construction sites half done. All over Casablanca as you'd drive around that's what you'd see. Construction cranes towering over abandoned building sites. A city undone. It was quite shocking.

Q: Well, who was the consul general?

VARGA: Let's see. When I first arrived the consul general was Richard Jackson, and when I left it was Timberlake Foster.

Q: Ah-ha. Well, what were you doing?

VARGA: I was the economic officer and there was a labor officer position also at the consulate. But for much of my time there nobody filled that position, so I also had that portfolio. And I was the backup for the foreign commercial service officer when he was unavailable, so I was doing that work. And I was also the backup for the consular officer when she took vacation. So I was wearing many hats.

Q: How did you find the local staff?

VARGA: Very efficient, very professional.

Q: And how about Casablancon society? I mean people you'd meet?

VARGA: I did a lot of political reporting there on attitudes toward the king and the monarchy. And when I would get Moroccans to open up to me they were quite critical of the government and the king. But of course nobody could say anything publicly about the king. So it was kind of a tense situation in that regard.

Q: Well, what was the problem with the king?

VARGA: The king had a certain stance toward the people where he was just not involved with the way most Moroccans led their lives. They were struggling and there didn't seem to be an awareness from the royal family or from those elites of how the typical Moroccan was trying to survive on a day-to-day basis. During my last year in Casablanca the king announced that he was going to build the third largest mosque in the world and he was going to not be selfish by funding it himself, but he wanted all Moroccans to participate in funding the mosque. And while that sounded good in theory, in actuality

what wound up happening was people were shaken down in their homes to be forced to contribute to pay for this mosque. And so it was a very tense situation there. Even American businesses that were operating in Morocco at that time were forced to give a percentage, not of their net profits, but of their gross profits, to the mosque campaign. And that was a sensitive subject.

Q: Did he build it?

VARGA: Yes, he did built it. It exists today, and apparently is a wonderful place to visit. And probably the scandal of the way it was funded is now no longer remembered by anybody. Moroccans of course can't say anything about it. But it was a very tense time because people who couldn't contribute often seemed to wind up in jail.

Q: Oh boy (laughs).

VARGA: Yes.

Q: Well, were we doing any AID (Agency for International Development) work there?

VARGA: Yes. There was a good AID mission there in Morocco. There were Peace Corps volunteers scattered throughout the country. So there was a lot of development assistance.

Q: I assume you developed ties with the Peace Corps as a former Peace Corps volunteer?

VARGA: Actually, I didn't have much contact with the Peace Corps there in Morocco. I was aware of their activities, but I was just too busy. I was wearing so many hats that I just didn't have the time.

Q: Well, just trying to think about Morocco as an Islamic society--was this one where women had to be in certain costumes?

VARGA: No, this is 1987 to '89 and Morocco was that kind of westernized Islamic country where European fashions were the norm. Even though women sometimes wore the chador, they would accent the chador with all sorts of Gucci kinds of fashions and the latest trends from Paris. And that was considered fine. The Moroccan government didn't seem to have a problem with women dressing that way.

Q: Well, things were not going very well in Algeria just to your east.

VARGA: Right.

Q: Did that spill over?

VARGA: No. At that time I did not see any spillover into Morocco.

Q: It was somewhat removed from you, but was there anything going on in the Polisario places?

VARGA: Yes.

Q: In the south.

VARGA: That was an ongoing problem for the Moroccan government, because the Western Sahara that Spain had given up was being claimed by Morocco as part of its territory. And you had the Polisario claiming that it was an independent entity. So that was an ongoing tension for the government, and we did a fair amount of reporting on that topic from the consulate.

Q: Did you feel that the government had pretty good support among the populace on this particular stand?

VARGA: It was all one sided. Hassan II used to make speeches to the Moroccan people that he was reclaiming this land that belonged to Morocco and there could be no argument about it. And so Morocco publicly would just repeat that line from the king. So there wasn't really very much political discourse about what was truly right in accordance with international legal norms.

Q: Well, given various things, how popular did you find the king?

VARGA: People publicly would say "oh, we love him." But you know, when you got to know Moroccans intimately and they felt free to be honest behind closed doors, people had a lot of problems with the way he ruled as the monarch of Morocco.

Q: Could you get around fairly easily?

VARGA: Yes.

Q: Pretty good access?

VARGA: Yes. I'll never forget, when I was going through my consultations before going out to Morocco, I had some meetings at the State Department with different bureaus. And they'd said to me, "We're not getting enough street reporting from typical Moroccans. And so, we'd like you when you're there, Michael, if you can, make that part of your focus." And I did that. I was fortunate enough with a beard and an aquiline nose to pass very easily in many milieux in Morocco where nobody would know I was American sitting in a café. And I got to know a lot of Moroccans very closely.

Q: Ah. In Casablanca, where was business going? What was going on business-wise?

VARGA: Casablanca is Morocco's commercial capital, so all the major industries have their headquarters there. Morocco is a big phosphate producing country, and so there's a lot of government-controlled parastatal industries that process phosphate and export it to the rest of the world. And the economy seemed to be doing well for the elites, but not really trickling down to much of the Moroccan population.

Q: Was American business particularly interested in things in Morocco?

VARGA: Yes. Morocco was considered a good investment at that time. The king was thought to be politically stable. And so we had a lot of American businesses coming through, wanting to get the point of view of the commercial attaché, or in his absence I would give my opinion about whether it was wise to be investing in Morocco. And many American businesses did invest.

Q: I assume that French influence is very strong there.

VARGA: Yes.

Q: Were the French active? I mean the French consulate general, was it active?

VARGA: Yes. French diplomats were much more active than anybody else in terms of connections to the Moroccan government and the royal family. And they seemed to have a lot of investment deals, a lot of trade deals going all the time.

Q: Well, you were there from when to when now?

VARGA: 1987 to 1989.

Q: Did you find our relations with Israel to come up all the time and cause arguments or not?

VARGA: Yes. There were -- it was a prickly relationship whenever Israel was mentioned. Morocco has a large Jewish community, and so the king supposedly had a special feeling for Jewish population. But nonetheless, Israel as a political entity was a sore point in terms of the U.S. bilateral relationship with Morocco because we seemed to always be siding with Israel and the Moroccans felt in some instances that we needed to be more objective.

Q: Well, after you'd been there about two years, where'd you go?

VARGA: Then I went back to Washington to the State Department headquarters and I worked in the Economic Bureau, EB.

Q: You were in the Economic Bureau from when to when?

VARGA: I was in the Economic Bureau from 1989 to 1991.

Today is the 7th of July, 2014 with Michael Varga. And Michael, we're -- you've come to the Economic Bureau in Washington after Casablanca. You were there from when to when?

VARGA: I started in the Economic Bureau in 1989. I was in what was called the Planning and Analysis Staff for a year.

Q: What particular things were you dealing with?

VARGA: We were given generally tasks involving briefing materials for the White House when heads of state were coming into town. We were tasked with doing summaries of the economies of the countries of these various leaders for the White House. And my understanding is that many of the things we were working on were used for the briefing books for Vice President Dan Quayle.

Q: Did you get any feel for Quayle's use of this? Because he certainly has been portrayed, at least in the press, as being quite a lightweight. But sometimes at a different level it's really quite different. How did you find him?

VARGA: I didn't have any personal contact with him or his staff, but I can tell you that a number of times when I was doing these summaries on an economy of a country, often the memo would get bounced back to me saying I was using too many complicated sentence constructions, and to make the sentences shorter and keep all the ideas very simple. So draw your own conclusions from that.

Q: Yeah.

VARGA: *(laughs)*

Q: Well, how did you find this job?

VARGA: It was quite challenging. We seemed to have tasks from the assistant secretary of EB on a daily basis, and we didn't have a lot of staff. So it was very challenging. But after a year in that office, EB, the Economic Bureau, had an opening in the Office of Monetary Affairs, that dealt with debt rescheduling and, and other economic developments. And they felt that was a higher priority to fill that position. So I was asked by the Economic Bureau to shift over to that office. I became the point person for the Economic Bureau for the first President Bush's (that is, George Herbert Walker Bush) program for Latin America in terms of the interagency process. It was called the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative. The acronym that was used was EAI. And I was

the point person for the Economic Bureau at the State Department on anything related to the EAI.

Q: Well, how were the Latin economies at that time? I mean there was overwhelming debt, and then some of the countries were getting ready to default or already defaulting. How stood it in your time?

VARGA: The thing that we worked on most involved trade flows in terms of tariffs that were impeding flows of imports and exports between the United States and these various countries. And the whole point of the EAI was to try to liberalize trade to such a degree that we could stimulate those economies through greater trade with the United States. So there was a lot of focus on tariff barriers or other barriers to trade.

Q: Was there concern that countries were finding us a much better market than we were finding them to be for U.S. goods?

VARGA: Yes. There was a sense even then--this is well before the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, which would come much later--there was a sense that these countries, while they were in need, they were not reducing the barriers to American imports into their economies to the same degree that we were trying to reduce the barriers to their exports to the United States. And so it didn't seem quite reciprocal. So there was a lot of focus on that, trying to say, "Well look, the United States is doing X, Y, and Z, and you need to do A, B, and C or we can't really go forward."

Q: Were there any countries that were particular problems in your eyes?

VARGA: I don't remember a lot of the specific cases now.

Q: How did you find the Economic Bureau? You know, as a workplace and types of people in it and all?

VARGA: I enjoyed working there because I'd gotten my master's degree from Notre Dame in economics, and this was a real test of really doing a lot of the stuff I had learned in graduate school. And so in that sense it was very satisfying. But at the same time, I'll note that the assistant secretary at that time for EB was a political appointee, and there just seemed to be not as much attention to doing good economics versus doing what was politically necessary, dictated by maybe some political folks over at the White House.

Q: Can you think of any --

VARGA: There was a sense of a little discontent about that aspect of it.

Q: Well, can you think of any particular examples?

VARGA: Sometimes when we would do these materials for those briefing books for visitors coming in, we would write up, “OK, this particular country’s economy is in trouble. The inflation rate is, say 33%, and the government isn’t really grappling with these kinds of pressures. And it is looking for help from the IMF (International Monetary Fund), but isn’t willing to do what the IMF requires, like reducing government budget deficits. And those things would sometimes get bounced back to us because they would say, “Well, we don’t want to raise these negatives about this country’s economy. Put in only the positive things about the economy.”

And we’d say, “Well, but that doesn’t give an accurate picture of the economic situation.”

And they’d say, “Don’t worry about that. Just put in positives, only what’s going right in their economy.” So there was a little bit of discontent with that because it wasn’t an accurate picture of what was going on in a particular country’s economy.

Q: Did you feel that for the most part you were getting pretty good statistics and we were able to keep our finger on the economic pulse of the world?

VARGA: You would never trust just one source. You always knew that you had to be checking a variety of sources for your data. And of course in many countries the informal sector is a great part of the economy, the undocumented kinds of exchanges that occur in many developing countries that are not reflected in the official statistics of the economy. So you have to sort of weigh that with when you’re looking at the official numbers. You could make a judgment: we know maybe the actual level of economic activity is higher or lower based on the size of the informal sector. You’d use your smarts to put the best accurate picture together. And generally data from the IMF and other sources was considered a good basis on which to build some sort of picture of an economy.

Q: Well, I know I was in, in the late ‘70s I was consul general in Naples.

VARGA: Uh-huh.

Q: And Naples was sort of the glove capital of the world. They had all these little glove outfits sort of in cellars and all. And yet, there was not a single official glove factory in the city.

VARGA: Right.

Q: After your time there, were you looking towards a particular area to go to? Obviously economics was your bag, but were you thinking of some country to go to?

VARGA: At that point in my career I had decided that I really did want NEA to be my home bureau since I had done those first assignments in Dubai and Casablanca. So I decided I should do a tour in NEA (Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs) in Washington. So that’s what I bid on next, and I wound up getting assigned as the desk officer for Lebanon

in NEA. That was a very exciting time to be the desk officer for Lebanon, because in the early '90s -- this is 1991 to 1993 -- we still had American hostages in Lebanon. So it was a very dicey time, and of course security for the American embassy in Beirut was a prime concern after the bombings that had taken place there in the 1980s. So it was very tough work, but it was very satisfying work to be the desk officer at that time.

Q: It would seem rather difficult for Lebanon in the midst of this time of troubles to have much of an economy.

VARGA: That's certainly true. Lebanon at that time was recovering; in 1989 an agreement was signed in Ta'if, Saudi Arabia officially ending the civil war in Lebanon. And so here I am becoming the desk officer in 1991 and not enough time has elapsed with the supposed cessation of the civil war to really rebuild the economy. But nonetheless, there wasn't the kind of killing that had been going on in Lebanon during that period. So people were actually applying for permits to build buildings and construct businesses and things like that. So there were the signs that Lebanon had the chance to revive itself, but it was going to take some time. But the greater issue at that point was with American hostages still being held. Whenever Lebanon came up in terms of U.S. government circles the first focus was, "OK, well, you know, until we get the hostages out we're not dealing with any other issues related to Lebanon. As long as Americans are being held there, that has to be the prime concern."

Q: Did you go to Lebanon?

VARGA: I did. When I first took over the assignment I flew into Cyprus and then was helicoptered into Beirut, and had a very good orientation trip. Ryan Crocker was then the ambassador in Beirut. He would later of course go on to positions as ambassador in Iraq and Afghanistan and other places. But I had a very good visit to Lebanon. I'll be the first to admit it, that knowing that Terry Anderson, the journalist, was still being held at that time as a hostage, there was a certain fear in me that as an official of the U.S. government traveling around Lebanon I was at some risk. That's not something I had had to deal with, let's say, while I was working in the Economic Bureau.

Q: Well, could you call on industrialists? Merchants and all?

VARGA: Yes. I had calls outside the embassy, but of course on every call that I went on I had probably 12 to 14 security people with me. Usually somebody from the Bureau of Diplomatic Security would go along, but the rest of those individuals were local militia that the U.S. government had hired to protect the embassy. And they went along to make sure nothing untoward happened to me when I was outside of the embassy compound. So it was a little bit unusual for me to be going to appointments and having 14 people along with me, just for my own security.

Q: Well, how did the Lebanese you called upon view this? With amusement, or understanding, or what?

VARGA: Yes, they seemed to understand it. They would laugh a little bit because it did seem like overkill. But of course if something had happened to me we probably would be having a different conversation with people saying, “Well, why didn’t he have more security? Why wasn’t he protected better?”

There was an incident where I had to go meet the Mayor of Tripoli in Northern Lebanon and the embassy supposedly had informed the Lebanese Armed Forces that I was making such a trip. And as we were heading closer to Tripoli in our little convoy, me in a sedan from the embassy with two security vehicles in front and behind me, just outside of Tripoli we were suddenly stopped by a deployment of Syrian soldiers. At that time of course the Syrian troops were occupying a significant part of Lebanon. And the Syrian forces got out of their Jeeps and pointed machine guns at me sitting on the back seat of the sedan, and it seemed kind of dicey at the moment. But in the end, the Syrians claimed that they had never been informed that I was making this visit to the Mayor of Tripoli, and they were just reacting to the security vehicles around my sedan because all those Lebanese local hires were carrying guns openly in these open-topped vehicles. And they considered that a security risk to have these vehicles heading into Tripoli with all these armed men visible to the population of Tripoli. So it just gives you a hint of some of the tension. Perhaps the Lebanese Armed Forces had of course informed the Syrians and the Syrians were somehow trying to send me a message or send a message to the U.S. government about not being willing to cooperate with what we were trying to do in Lebanon. Or maybe it was just a snafu and the Syrians really didn’t know who I was or what was going on, and they were just reacting as anybody would to the sight of armed men coming into the city.

Q: Well, how did you find the embassy? Were they able to carry on at least in the work you were doing? regular reporting and all?

VARGA: Yes. They were difficult conditions of course for the embassy officers. But they were trying to maintain the regular sort of order in terms of trying to report. Because security was such a high-risk proposition, many of their contacts would come to the embassy to talk to them, rather than the officer venturing out. And everybody understood why that was necessary at that time. But yes, the embassy seemed to be functioning very well. Ryan Crocker was an on top of things, a hands-on ambassador. He seemed to know everything that was going on and everybody seemed to have a great deal of respect for him. So I think it was a good operation from my perspective.

Q: Well, did you feel your time on the Lebanese desk had pretty well established your NEA credentials?

VARGA: It did. At the same time I have to admit that two years on the Lebanon desk with all the challenges we had--we had to evacuate the ambassador a number of times because of security threats. There were a lot of working weekends when suddenly there was an emergency, some crisis of some sort or another. After two years of that, I felt I

needed a change. So even though I had done all this work in NEA, I decided I would apply for a Pearson Fellowship at the World Trade Center Miami. And I got that. And so for a year the State Department lent me as an economist to the World Trade Center Miami to help them work on export promotion for American companies, utilizing the World Trade Center to increase their trade opportunities in Latin America. And so that was my next assignment.

Q: OK, you were there when?

VARGA: I was in Miami from '93 to '94.

Q: OK, well how did this Trade Center work?

VARGA: It's an agency that's set up to assist with business opportunities. So businessmen would come in. They would join the Trade Center as a member, pay some annual dues. And that would entitle them then to some consultations with the staff in terms of getting leads on business opportunities throughout Latin America. And that's what we would provide. And my main job while I was there was to run an international conference called the Americas Business Outlook, which involved three days of seminars and round table discussions and presentations by people involved in any aspect of trade with Latin America from the U.S. perspective. So I coordinated that conference with the Foreign Commercial Service and the U.S. Commerce Department was a sponsor of that conference as well. And the different commercial officers in various offices throughout the United States were rewarded with attending the conference if they got some of their local entrepreneurs to attend the conference.

Q: Did you find Miami a particularly good place to operate? Because certainly in Latin America, Miami is practically the capital of Latin America, or so it would appear. They have very good contacts there.

VARGA: Yes. Miami is perfectly positioned to play that role and the World Trade Center Miami was perfectly situated to sort of take the bull by the horns, if you will, and run with different opportunities they were learning of in Latin America and in feeding information through business leads to various businesses. It was a great situation, and in fact, by the end of my year there we were able to launch a new operation called the Florida Trade Data Center, which was sort of an outgrowth from the World Trade Center Miami. This is before the internet age so a data center that could provide quicker information to businesses about trade leads and trade opportunities throughout Latin America was in great demand.

Q: Well, being there, I would think that one of our concerns would be drug money.

VARGA: Yes. There was certainly a sense that a lot of the funds that companies had might not have been acquired necessarily with clean hands. There was some concern about that. But frankly, it wasn't part of my job to focus on that. So while I was aware of

that concern, my interest during this year of being lent to the World Trade Center Miami was business promotion. So anything that a business was asking me to do in terms of putting them in touch with trade opportunities, I was willing to do.

Q: Well, what was your relation to the Department of Commerce?

VARGA: The Department of Commerce had an office there in Miami. We worked quite closely with them. They had officers overseas in many of these Latin American countries who could feed different leads to us about investment opportunities or trade opportunities, that we could then pass on to private sector companies in the United States. So it was a good working relationship. We had very down to earth kinds of meetings and phone calls that facilitated the exchange of information. So that in the end, American business was being promoted. That was always the goal. What are we doing to assist American business to increase its economic activity in the Americas? That was the question we were always trying to answer.

Q: Were there any countries that gave you particular trouble in the Americas?

VARGA: We would get quite a lot of grouching about the embargo with Cuba because from the Miami perspective there were a lot of businesses coming to the World Trade Center Miami saying that they would hear of different opportunities in Cuba and they wanted guidance on how they could proceed. And essentially, with the embargo, we were telling them, "Well, you really can't, you can't do that. Don't do that." And they weren't happy with that response.

Q: Well, what about Brazil? Brazil was, particularly in that era, was a relatively closed economy, wasn't it? Difficult to break into.

VARGA: I don't remember anything specific about Brazil at that time. What you'd hear sometimes about Brazil was that there was a sense that a lot of the economic activity was off the books. Maybe there were payments being made to facilitate bids on different business opportunities that some American businessmen were uncomfortable with.

Q: Well then, did you get to travel around much?

VARGA: I did not. During that year I was pretty much there in Miami the whole year. And that was fine, because coming from the northeast of the United States and living in the Midwest for a time, I was delighted with the Florida climate. And so I was happy to be there in Miami. This predated much of the chic cachet that South Beach developed in later years. When I was there South Beach was just becoming someplace. It hadn't yet arrived to be the artistic and fashion Mecca it is today. So it was fun to be in Miami then.

Q: Well, what about Spanish? Miami is sort of a center of Spanish culture.

VARGA: Yes. Certainly Spanish goes a long way if you're going to live in that environment. And I had been fortunate in different periods in my life working with some migrant workers, I had picked up some very basic Spanish. So that proved very serviceable during that year in Miami with just making Latin Americans feel more comfortable with me when I could at least begin conversations with them in Spanish, and then we would switch to English after a certain amount of time. But it goes a long way just to be able to greet people and have those initial conversations in Spanish.

Q: Well, I was wondering, you were dealing more with the subcontinent there, where Mexico sort of had its California links and it wasn't part of the Latin American contact in Florida. Is that right?

VARGA: Yes, you're right. The focus seemed to be much more on trade with Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, and the Central American countries. Mexico was rarely mentioned, or rarely asked about there in the World Trade Center Miami. Our sense was that businesses in California were likely monitoring conditions in Mexico. Those in Florida did not exhibit a strong interest in Mexico at that time.

Q: I would think so. I mean it would make sense.

VARGA: Yes.

Q: Did you run across the Cuban lobby, or was that dying out by then?

VARGA: Every now and then, when you'd be at a social event or some kind of a fundraiser for some nonprofit organization you'd run into some Cubans who had very strong opinions about U.S. foreign policy as it related to Castro. And once they found out that I was on loan from the State Department, they would grab my ear and not want to let me go until they were sure I would be going back to Washington with their point of view in my head. So the Cuban issue was -- when you live in Miami, at least at that time in '93 to '94 era when I was there--the whole issue of Castro and what was going to happen after Castro seemed to be paramount. I'm not sure it's such an issue now with the way Cuba has evolved. But at that time it was really at the top of some people's agenda.

Q: Well then, where'd you go afterwards?

VARGA: After that, after sunny Miami, hot Miami, I went to cold, frigid Toronto.

Q: Oh boy.

VARGA: *(laughs)* I was the economic officer at the American consulate in Toronto.

Q: And from when to when?

VARGA: I was there from '94 to '95, only a year because at the end of 1995 my health took a turn for the worse and I had to take early retirement from the department.

Q: All right. Well now, what was Toronto like at that time?

VARGA: It was very active. The Toronto Stock Exchange was really quite bold, thinking of itself as a competitor to New York, or wanting to be a competitor to New York in the future. And so it was laying the foundations for becoming that kind of an exchange that could perhaps at some point be thought of as much of a business capital as New York was. I think Toronto was a little bit misguided to think that it would ever be on a par with New York. But that's what you'd encounter all the time talking to Canadian businessmen. That Toronto would eventually be of that stature. So I spent a lot of my time talking to different banking officials and people at the Ministry of Finance, and the Economic Ministry about Toronto's great expectations. That at one point it would be a bigger player in the world economy.

Q: Well, how stood relations within Canada with Quebec at that time?

VARGA: Quebec was a very tough issue at that time, because while I was in Toronto, Quebec was mounting one of its perennial challenges to the Canadian Union and there was a vote coming up for independence in Quebec. And that was sort of taking all the oxygen out of the room when any political discussions would arise about the future of Canada. People would say, "Well, you've got to get past this Quebec referendum. And then we can think about other issues. But until we can get past the Quebec vote we can't focus on other things." And ultimately of course that vote was defeated and Quebec did not decide to secede from Canada. But it comes up every now and again every few years, because the Quebecois don't feel that they get adequate attention from English-speaking Canada. And so you can understand their pique at that sense of not being treated equally with the other provinces.

Q: Our relationship with Canada--we've always had big commercial relations, but politically sometimes we had problems. Did you find that -- well, for example, -- you having served in Miami, did you find that Cuban American relations was a subject of concern in Toronto?

VARGA: Yes. Canadian companies of course were free to make agreements with different Cuban enterprises, and you often had American businessmen showing up at the consulate in Toronto saying, "Well, this is patently unfair. I mean my Canadian competitor here can make these deals and I as an American company can't do the same things. So work on it. Help us. Do something,"

Q: Could you do anything?

VARGA: It would become a sore point. I understood where the American businessmen were coming from. We would make demarches from time to time to the Canadian

government about different activities we became aware of. Of what Canadian companies were doing in Cuba. But frankly, the government officials would listen, but nothing would ever change. Canada had a different approach toward Cuba. And so while we would tell Washington, "OK, we made the demarche," we explained our points, but ultimately, at the end of the day frankly nothing was any different. And the Canadian companies went on profiting from their enterprises with Cuban partners.

Q: Well, we had passed the Cuban Democracy Act in 1992 which would punish subsidiaries of American firms that dealt with Cuba. Was that ever put into effect?

VARGA: I remember a lot of discussion about that, but there were some significant loopholes, I believe. But it didn't affect the day-to-day life as we knew it in Toronto at that time.

Q: But how would you say relations were with Canada, politically? Canadians pay a lot of attention to our politics.

VARGA: Yes, they do. And you always had a sense that the Canadians were paying much more attention to the relationship than frankly the United States was paying to the Canadian bilateral relationship. We had a lot of issues now that the North American Free Trade Agreement had been enacted just before I took over that assignment in Toronto. So we had a lot of trade issues coming up as a result of NAFTA, and we had a lot of disputes over softwood lumber and access for wine imports from the United States into the Canadian market. And I was heavily involved with those bilateral discussions. And sometimes they were quite testy. We always thought of the Canadians as being relatively easy to deal with. But frankly, some of these negotiations were very challenging.

Q: No, there's nothing like neighbors (laughs) in any relationship. If you have to deal with neighbors, usually means more problems than when you can deal with people or nations at some distance.

VARGA: Right.

Q: Well, did you find that a lot of the economic ties bypassed Washington? Somebody in Michigan would pick up the phone and deal with somebody in Ottawa or something without paying much attention to the American or Canadian governments?

VARGA: Yes, that certainly was true. There seemed to be a lot more direct communication where the U.S. government only learned after the fact about certain trade deals or trade negotiations that were happening on the private sector side. And that's fine. We like it when the private sector doesn't need assistance from the public sector to get things done. But a lot of times we were surprised by developments that took place without our being aware that talks were even happening. But you know, when you have neighbors that close with that kind of border it's not unexpected that a lot of businesses

would have those direct communications with those counterparts on the other side of the border.

Q: Well, did --

VARGA: I guess one of the highlights of my time in Toronto was the G7 Summit. It was held in 1995 in Halifax and officers from all of the Canadian posts were asked to work the summit. I was asked from Toronto to go over to Halifax. I was the control officer for Robert Rubin, who was then treasury secretary, at the G7 Summit. And I didn't really have much to do for Mr. Rubin. But oddly enough, on one afternoon of the G7 Summit, an assistant secretary was supposed to be a note taker in a meeting between Warren Christopher, who was then the secretary of state, and the Japanese finance minister. And for some reason the assistant secretary was missing. And nobody knew where he was and the meeting was about to begin. And since I was hovering outside the room, they pulled me into the meeting as the note taker. And when I went into the room there was no chair for me. So I hunkered down and squatted on my knees in the corner of the room and it only took Warren Christopher a second of looking at me scrunched down in this official meeting with the Japanese finance minister for him to say, "Look, let's get that man a chair." *(laughs)*.

Q: (laughs)

VARGA: So the participants waited until they got me a chair, and then I took the notes on the meeting. And when the meeting was over, as Secretary Christopher was leaving, I didn't know what I should do since I'd been pulled into the meeting on this impromptu basis. So when the official delegation was getting into their vehicles, I was sort of standing there, and Warren Christopher himself said, "Michael! Get in the car!"

Q: (laughs)

VARGA: So I dove into the last vehicle and rode back with the secretary to their hotel and wrote up my report and, and all was right with the world.

Q: (laughs) Well, it was not in your particular consular district, but did you get involved in any of the oil situation? Because Canada had oil sands and other sort of new areas of producing oil?

VARGA: There were discussions about different mining activities and different searches for new sources of oil at that time, but you're right, we had a consulate I believe in Calgary and --

Q: Yeah.

VARGA: -- maybe the Vancouver consulate as well took the lead on that. And we in Toronto were not actively involved in any of that.

Q: Yeah.

VARGA: The other big thing from my own personal perspective that happened when I was in Canada was every year the Toronto Star newspaper runs an international competition where short stories are chosen for prizes. I submitted a short story in that year, 1995, and wound up taking first prize.

Q: Oh boy.

VARGA: And so on a given Sunday in June that year—June the fourth--when people had their Sunday paper delivered to them that morning, on the front page was my picture, announcing that my story had won first prize. Inside the Sunday paper was my story reprinted and a nice article about my career and my diplomatic life. The Canadians gave me a lot of attention for this writing achievement, which I enjoyed.

Q: Well, had you sort of felt the urge to get in? Had you been writing and sort of honing your writing skills at these various other times in your career?

VARGA: Yes. I've been a writer all my life and I had a play published while I was in graduate school, which then got produced shortly afterwards. And while I was in Morocco the students at the Hassan The Second University produced the first act of one of my plays there in Casablanca. And I'd written a number of short stories. The BBC had broadcast one of my short stories. So it was an area that I had polished over many years. And knowing The Toronto Star was running this competition just gave me an incentive to try to produce a new story and see how it would do. And it's a story about the Foreign Service essentially. It's called "Collapsing Into Zimbabwe." And it's not ever been published in the United States, and I hope at some point it will be available through some media outlet here in the United States. But at this time it's not. Although later this summer I expect my own website will be functioning. www.michaelvarga.com. People will be able to read that short story at the website.

Q: Well, when we finish this, I suggest you give us the short story if it's an electronic form. And we can include it in your oral history.

VARGA: Okay. I have a photocopy of the way it appeared in the newspaper, but I also have a Microsoft Word file of it the way I had created it. So I might only be able to share with you the Word document. I can share with you the photocopy, but I'm not sure that reproduces very well.

Q: Well, we can check on that later on.

VARGA: Yes.

Q: Well, how did you find Toronto, you know, as a social life? Montreal has a reputation of being a rather cosmopolitan place. Toronto's sort of all business. I mean that's the reputation I hear. How did you find it?

VARGA: When I was in Toronto it was developing its now-earned reputation as sort of Hollywood North. You had a great deal of films and television shows being produced in Toronto because the cost of doing business in Toronto was considered exceptionally competitive with the cost of producing programming in California or New York. And so we had a great deal of Hollywood types coming through Toronto and for the Toronto Film Festival that's held every year. So it was a chic place to be at that time in terms of the social life being quite active. In terms of movie premieres and museum openings of different exhibitions.

Q: Well now, who was the consul general?

VARGA: When I was there the consul general was G. Alfred Kennedy.

Q: How would you characterize him?

VARGA: We had a good working relationship.

Q: Well, I'm looking at the time. And so we wanted to stop at 12.

VARGA: Yes.

Q: So we'll pick this up, we'll sort of finish it off the next time.

VARGA: OK.

Q: And I promise to be on time next time.

VARGA: No problem. Although since I retired out of Toronto we don't have as much left to cover in terms of my diplomatic career.

Q: OK, but we do want to pick up on some of your concerns. You wanted to talk about how the State Department treated you medically and all. And I think we'd like to get that on the record.

VARGA: Well, I do. I believe I was one of the first officers maybe who retired because of HIV. And of course in the '90s, before the new treatments came along, people died pretty quickly. So I'm in a unique position in the sense that when I retired nobody expected that I'd last more than 18 months, and here I am sitting here in 2014.

Q: Yes. Things have really changed.

VARGA: Yes.

Q: Well, I'm 86 now, and I'm still going strong.

VARGA: Uh-huh.

Q: But I've had a triple bypass and, you know, I mean it's all sorts of things have been happening.

VARGA: Right.

Q: Screwing up the insurance people.

VARGA: Yeah.

Q: Their actuarial tables are (laughs) -- OK, but I would like to talk about that.

VARGA: OK.

Q: And also, you know, looking back on your career and all, anything else you'd like to comment on.

VARGA: Uh-huh.

Q: All right, well let's pick another time. How stand you for how about the 14th, the 16th, or?

VARGA: I can do the 16th.

Q: You like 10:30? If that works for you?

VARGA: That works for me.

Q: Uh-huh. Incidentally, what does Varga mean?

VARGA: It's Hungarian and it's -- the translation of it is a shoemaker, so it's a very common name in Hungary, much the way Cobbler might be in, in our language, or Shoemaker.

Q: OK, well we'll pick this up on the 16th.

VARGA: I saw the video of you receiving the Lifetime award. AFSA put a link to the video on its media digest.

Q: Well, as you saw I made sure that everybody's involved in the process of this got full credit for it.

VARGA: Yes. Unfortunately, the sound on the video isn't very good, so we can't really hear what you're saying.

Q: Well, I can email you a copy of the talk. It's very short.

VARGA: OK, sure.

Q: I'll do so.

VARGA: I'd welcome that.

Q: Well, all right today -- I'll make my announcement -- today is the 17th, or 16th of --

VARGA: Yes. Today's the 16th. I think.

Q: Yes. 16th of July, 2014 with Mike Varga. And you, you said you retired because of HIV or AIDS. What year did you retire?

VARGA: Well, the paperwork was filed in 1995, but because I had accrued a certain amount of annual leave that I had never taken, officially I didn't really retire until 1996.

Q: OK well, we want to pick up...try to recreate the era and institutional response to this. How did this -- what was the situation AIDS-wise in the early '90s?

VARGA: At that time, as you may recall, AIDS was still a death sentence in the mid 1990s. There were some drug treatments available, but they were not having a great deal of success and the mortality rate was still very high. And I went to my infectious disease doctor in Toronto, which was my assignment at that time, and I hadn't really been paying that much attention to my lab tests and my lab numbers. I had thrown myself into the job. And as the only economic officer at the post in Toronto I felt nobody else would be there to do the job if I didn't keep doing it. So I sort of put my own health on the back burner. But in the summer of '95 my doctor shook me by the lapels and said, "Michael! What's the end goal here? You going to die at your desk?" (*laughs*). And I sort of chuckled because she was being that dramatic, but she said, "I'm going to show you your lab numbers and how sick you are and the way you're going: that's what's going to happen. You're just going to die at your desk!" And that woke me up. And I realized that maybe I needed to be paying more attention to my health.

So I put in for a disability retirement through the State Department in June of 1995 and it took them four months until October of '95 to process that paperwork and grant me the disability retirement. And at that time of course my life expectancy from the doctors was about an estimated 18 months because we didn't have any of the new treatments that

would come along later. So it was a difficult situation because when the Department decided to grant me the retirement under whatever legal requirements the Department had, I was suddenly informed that I could no longer enter the consulate as an employee from that moment on. And no one had prepared me for that. That when the decision came down—approving my retiring on disability—that the day the decision came down I would have to sunder my official working relationship there at the consulate. And that was quite a shock. I was already dealing with the shock of being that ill and having to deal with my own health problems. But to have the Department tell me that I could no longer even go into my office was really quite difficult to deal with.

Q: Well, to go back a bit, was this disease contracted, at least at the time it was seen as being contracted through homosexual activity.

VARGA: Well --

Q: And I was wondering, what was the situation vis-à-vis homosexual activity at that time? We're talking about the mid '90s.

VARGA: I had been positive for some time. So we don't know exactly when I might have contracted the virus. So there's no way to be sure of how I contracted it or when I contracted it, but we know that I had contracted it. The test confirmed that I was HIV positive. So we had to deal with that fact and move forward.

Q: Well, what was the State Department's attitude toward homosexual activity at that time?

VARGA: I was a gay man in the Foreign Service and during the '80s and '90s, you could not be openly gay in the Department and expect to have a normal career. So many of us lived very closeted lives for our career's sake. When my security clearance had come up for review in 1991, I'll never forget, the Bureau of Diplomatic Security conducted that evaluation of me and one of the things they said was, "Well, we know you're a gay man and we know you're closeted, but that opens you to the prospect of blackmail. So we need you, in terms of renewing your security clearance, to make sure that we can verify that someone in your family knows that you're a gay man so that you can't be blackmailed."

And I was a little bit shocked by that turn of events. And I said, "Well, what are you asking me? What do you want me to do?"

And they said, "You're going to have to give us the name of some family member that you've shared this information with that we could then interview to verify that you are not a potential blackmail victim." And so, that following weekend I went to see my parents who were still alive at that time. And I had that conversation with them. And fortunately, you know, even though I had led a closeted life, my parents knew of my inclinations. So the following week I told the Bureau of Diplomatic Security that I had

communicated that with my parents and that they could interview them and hopefully renew my security clearance. And ultimately that's what happened.

But you know, in 1991 the Department was not very welcoming of homosexuals and it was a very difficult thing to do to balance having your professional career and trying to have a personal life that was rewarding for you.

Q: Well, one of the things that strikes me is, I've been around -- I've been in the Foreign Service, in or doing this since 1955, and where we've come from. And the very fact that it always had been put forward that homosexual activity per se was not technically a no-no. However, anybody who was a homosexual was open to blackmail. Therefore, it was a no-no.

VARGA: Right.

Q: And this idea that OK, if you're open about it you're not open to blackmail, you know, knowing security and its proclivities, this seems like a major step forward.

VARGA: Oh yes, the Department has -- in 2014 we can say the Department has come light years from where it was. But unfortunately I was in the Foreign Service probably at the wrong time for someone like me because it was not a hospitable place for a gay man to survive and function. But nonetheless, it was what it was and with my HIV in 1995 I needed to take some action because if I didn't do something about my health I was probably going to have a very quick end. I didn't really want to have that kind of an end to my life. I had books I wanted to write, places I still wanted to travel, family I wanted to visit. And so I took that early retirement on disability, and the Department was very good about processing my retirement. But you know, the irony is when you retire that quickly, so suddenly, you don't get the benefit of any of the programs that are designed to help people retire. I never was offered the retirement seminar. I never had any access to any of the resources that one would have in retirement. And while I'm grateful that I survived this long with the virus, much longer than anybody ever expected, you pay a price at a later point in your life when you didn't have the benefit for planning for a regular retirement.

Q: Well, I want to come to what you did after retirement. But before that, had you, as a homosexual, I mean before AIDS and all this, how did you find life in the Foreign Service as a gay man, it being such a no-no? How did you carry on?

VARGA: I led a double life, Stuart. I mean frankly I had my professional life and I was very good at my job. I got multiple meritorious honor awards and I was promoted quickly. In fact, in my A100 class I was the first one promoted to an FS-2 out of my class. So I did very well professionally. But personally, I could never talk about my own personal life. I never could share anything that was going on in my personal life with my colleagues. And over time that forces a certain cost to you, that splitting of your life in such a dichotomy between your professional life and your personal life. And over time I

don't think it's very healthy for an individual to have to maintain that, and I think that's what the Department has probably realized over the years, such that now it's a much more welcoming place for gay people and they accommodate a much more diverse population than when I was in the Foreign Service.

Q: Oh yes. Well, I was in the Foreign Service during the McCarthy years.

VARGA: Ah-ha.

Q: Did you feel that you were on your own, or was there an underground gay network or anything like that?

VARGA: I was aware of some other Foreign Service Officers who were gay, but we didn't really have any organized means of supporting each other, until the early '90s when I was at the Department and an organization that I understand has flourished in these most recent years called "GLIFA," Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs. I was part of the original group that started that organization, and I understand now they have a certain amount of recognition from the Department as a legitimate group within the Department, representing the interests of gays and lesbians in foreign affairs agencies. So we were just at the beginnings of that in the '90s. I didn't really get the benefit of all that before I retired in '96. But nonetheless, it was there. People were trying to make a community because they knew how hostile the Department had been to folks like us.

Q: Well, what did you do after you retired?

VARGA: The Department sort of pressed me. They wanted me out of Canada after that as quick as I could leave. Which again was something that I was totally unprepared for. I'm already dealing with the shock of sudden retirement, and the Department is saying, "OK, when can you get out of Canada?" And you know, a little bit more compassion on the bureaucratic side might have been helpful. But nonetheless, I was able to make a quick trip down to the States and find an apartment in Cape May, New Jersey. And I had some friends there who helped me find a place to move. I told the Department, "OK, I'm going to Cape May, New Jersey." Because I still had annual leave built up, they actually wrote orders for me transferring me from Toronto to Cape May, New Jersey.

Q: Good God.

VARGA: *(laughs)* I still have it in my files to this day. My TM-4 ordering me from Toronto to Cape May, New Jersey. They were accommodating that that's where I wanted to move. And at the time I had pressed my doctors on my life expectancy. I really needed to know how quickly I was likely to die, because there was a book that I wanted to write and I felt like if I had a better sense of how soon the end was coming I would have more motivation to write the book. The doctors did not want to give me a timeline, but I made them. And they told me, "OK, based on what we know today and the drugs that are

available today, in November '95, you probably have about 18 months left." So that would have put me about April of 1997. So that was my target.

I said to myself: "OK, I have to write this book and have it finished by April of 1997." So that's what I did there in Cape May, New Jersey. I wrote this mammoth book that had everything in it, drawing on my Peace Corps experiences, my various Foreign Service experiences, and other things from my life. It was nearly 800 pages. It would be an impossible book for anyone to get through. But nonetheless, I was going to write it before I died. And I did. That's what I did for those 18 months.

And then, when April '97 came around and I saw my doctors and they said, "You're doing well. We don't think you're going to die next month, or maybe even next year." So suddenly I had new life. The new drugs became available at that time called protease inhibitors, and here we are today in 2014. Those drugs have kept me alive all these years and I've been able to write quite a number of things during this time and that nearly 800-page novel has now been whittled down to two separate much more readable books. And in fact, later this year I hope to publish the Peace Corps novel part of that book. It's called Under Chad's Spell, and will be available through Amazon and through my website, www.michaelvarga.com. And so, that's what I did (*laughs*).

Q: Well, were you able to meet with our -- or make any effort to meet with others in the Foreign Service community who'd had the same outlook? In other words, dealing with the same sort of grim prognosis?

VARGA: I was aware of a couple other Foreign Service Officers who were HIV positive at that time. And I'm sad to tell you that all of them that I knew have long since passed. I don't know of a single Foreign Service Officer that I knew at that time that was positive who's still with us. I'm not sure why I've lasted this long. I'm not sure how to explain that. But the ones that I knew are all gone.

Q: I feel a little -- I'm 86 now. And I feel the same way about how many of my contemporaries were moderate to heavy smokers.

VARGA: Mm-hmm.

Q: And I had been too. But I quit when the surgeon general came out with his report I believe in '64.

VARGA: Right.

Q: And I'm still here, and those that didn't aren't.

VARGA: (*laughs*) Well, God bless you for hanging on.

Q: Well, you know, I mean, it does show though there are these medical changes that are quite significant.

VARGA: Mm-hmm, sure.

Q: Well, what have you been doing now? I mean over this considerable amount of time you've been retired. Was it strictly writing, or have you gotten involved in other matters?

VARGA: I've done a fair amount of volunteering. And of course the irony, as God likes to joke, God likes to laugh, even though I'd had that death sentence pronounced on me and was told I was going to be dead in 18 months, I've now buried a significant number of my family members, such that my family is now dwindled to just a couple members. And I'm still here. So despite the fact that I had been told that I was the next to go, I'm not gone yet (*laughs*). And so I've concentrated on my writing. I've written a number of columns that have appeared in different newspapers, including The Atlanta Journal Constitution and I've had some success with some of my short stories and essays. I now have a website to promote some of my writings and to promote this Peace Corps novel. So I've thrown myself into volunteering and writing and looking after ill family members. That's kept me pretty busy.

Q: Well, to go back to the bad ol' days, did you ever feel that you may have been approached by a member of one or another of the communist security services to tempt you into homosexual activity which they could then photograph and then blackmail you?

VARGA: No, I, I never felt like I was approached. The only time that came up, apart from my renewal of my security clearance in 1991, was in 1986 when I was stationed in Dubai. I had wanted to visit Hungary, which was the location of my father's relatives. And I had to seek permission from the Department to travel to Hungary. And the Department was a little bit feisty about my going as a single male, and I'm pretty sure that they knew at that time that I was a homosexual. They delayed giving me the approval to travel and I had a meeting with the regional security officer there in the United Arab Emirates who said, you know, "Michael, we want you to be on the look-out for any possible situations where you're going to be a potential target for blackmail." And nobody needed to say anything further. I understood what they referring to. So I was very careful on that trip. But I never felt during my career that I was ever approached or that I really was a likely target for blackmail. I think that was just the ethos at that time. That everybody had this bugaboo about blackmail and homosexuals, and they didn't really want to think too much about it. But they just thought OK, keep *that* at a distance.

Q: Well, I spent five years in Yugoslavia and used to do a lot of traveling on my own as a consular officer investigating and all. I kept waiting for that blonde babe to --

VARGA: (*laughs*)

Q: -- you know, appear. And none came! I felt just a little bit disappointed. I was ready to test myself.

VARGA: Right, sure (*laughs*).

Q: But anyway, it's an interesting world. However, I mean, you know, we can joke about this, but with sex we've had some rather serious situations. As far as I know, the ones that have come to light are ones that are male-female, but it was not a benign atmosphere out there.

VARGA: No. It was not. And, as I said before, I really felt a lot of pressure when other people had pictures of their wives on their desks in the office in my various assignments. I never felt the freedom if I was dating someone ever to talk about or even have any hint that I was engaged in a same-sex relationship. It was verboten. You just couldn't even bring it up.

Q: Well, are you involved in any sort of campaign, clubs, activities, vis-à-vis HIV or gay liberation or anything like that?

VARGA: I help to coordinate a support group here in the Atlanta area for HIV positive men and women over 50. For those of us who have lasted this long. The virus just hasn't been around long enough for people to know or doctors to know really how people age with HIV. So this is an area of study that everybody really wants to get more information about. The support group is for people over 50. We share stories as we seem to be challenged a little bit more in terms of cognitive functioning. Maybe our brains are deteriorating faster because of the HIV and the toxic medications we've been on for so long than a normal person of our age. Perhaps our brains are deteriorating at a more rapid rate. That's an area we're trying to look into and document.

Q: OK. Well, what will happen now is --

VARGA: Mm-hmm.

Q: -- we will within a reasonable time, a couple months or so, get you, send you a transcript of our interview.

VARGA: OK.

Q: We'd like you to edit it and also in editing we encourage you to put in more. You know, more detail or gee, he didn't ask me about that, or I forgot to mention that. Well, put it in. And more is better than less in these oral histories. And then send it back to us. We will put it in final form, send you a copy, and send it on our internet, on our website and with the Library of Congress.

VARGA: Uh-huh.

Q: And so we'll keep you informed. Have you looked at our website?

VARGA: Yes, I have.

Q: And we keep finding more things to dig up and all.

VARGA: Yes. Mr. Kennedy, now that I have my own website I invite you to visit it and take a look at what I've put there. It's michaelvarga.com.

Q: I will do so.

VARGA: I appreciate that.

Q: OK, and in your transcript, when you edit it, you might insert your website.

VARGA: *(laughs)* You've been doing this a while. Is my story very different from other stories you've heard?

Q: Well, it's different --

VARGA: Or it is much like what you've heard?

Q: Well, I haven't heard one -- you present a different side of things. For example, I've never heard of the idea of security saying, "Well, tell somebody in the family so you can't be blackmailed." I mean when -- I go back to McCarthy when, first place, I always am amused at how down they were on homosexuals. And Roy Cohen, his chief guy, was a raving -- he and David Shine went on a tour of Europe weeding out communist books and all. And yet they were both raving homosexuals.

VARGA: Right.

Q: I mean it was a -- wasn't ironic, it was just amusing.

VARGA: Yeah, sure. Sure. Well, there were certain double standards.

Q: Oh boy.

VARGA: -- back -- you know.

Q: OK. Well anyway --

VARGA: Appreciated the time you've taken to talk to me, and I appreciate you listening to my particular tale.

Q: Yes, we've got all sorts of people in the Foreign Service. This is not an exposé thing, but people's stories to tell. We're trying to get something about what the hell do people in diplomacy do and who are they?

VARGA: Right.

Q: And plus the fact that any one of us has had interesting -- hate to use the term -- interfaces or something with foreign cultures.

VARGA: Right.

Q: And you know, and in many ways that's the big story. And the others, how we coped in this particular world, is another story. And I mean it helps make our profession seem alive I think. I don't think there's any profession that has as much background through these oral histories as we have. I mean we show that these are real honest to God people.

VARGA: Mm-hmm, yes. And if we can make our stories come alive and people feel the humanity of the individuals who served in the Foreign Service, then it's all to the good.

Q: Yes. Well, I had one lady I was interviewing who I'd known personally. I mean a friend of the family. And at the end she said, "Oh, I thought you were going to ask me about my affairs," (laughs).

VARGA: (laughs)

Q: That was -- particularly with her I wasn't going to go into that.

VARGA: Yes, right (laughs).

Q: But OK Mike. I've enjoyed this. And if you run into anybody you think might have an interesting career and all, let me know.

VARGA: Sure. Sure. Well, thank you Stuart. And I wish you the best of luck and I'll look forward to receiving that transcript.

Q: OK, I'll send that right away.

VARGA: OK, thank you. You have a good rest of the day.

Q: OK, take care.

VARGA: Bye-bye.

ADDENDA



THE SUNDAY STAR

High 24C

June 4, 1995

Metro Edition

Globe trotter finds his mark as our story contest winner

By TRISH CRAWFORD
FEATURE WRITER

Michael Varga, a globe-trotting diplomat now living in Yorkville, is the winner of The Sunday Star's 1995 short story contest.

Varga, 39, a specialist in economics and political affairs, has lived in Morocco, Syria, Chad, the United Arab Emirates and Washington in a career that would be right at home in a Graham Greene novel.

But it is the relationship between the sexes, not nations, which is the subject of his winning short story, *Collapsing Into Zimbabwe*. The popular story contest, now in its 18th year, drew more than 2,400

entries from Canada, the United States and Europe.

Second prize winner is Pamela Stewart of Scarborough, a private investigator and single mother of two boys, whose story will appear next Saturday.

Third prize goes to writer Elisavietta Ritchie, who has had numerous poetry collections published as well as one fiction collection. Her story will appear in next week's Sunday Star. After that, a total of 25 runner-up entries will appear throughout the summer in the weekend papers.

The winning story is narrated by a foreign service officer, but Varga insists it's not at all



MICHAEL VARGA: Winning author has also written a handful of plays.

Please see Our, A10

Collapsing Into Zimbabwe A Short Story by Michael Varga (Winner of the Toronto Star Short Story Competition, 1995)

Tony is going to prison today. Don't get me wrong, he's not a criminal. It's his job. He's a consular officer at the American Consulate in Toronto. He's supposed to check up regularly on the welfare of American citizens being held in prison. Many people are surprised to learn this is part of Tony's job as a diplomat. (Tony was startled by it, too. He's an economist by training and didn't imagine his Foreign Service work would include spoon-feeding Jello to the imprisoned who misguidedly believe if they refuse to eat, they may be freed. Very few fast for more than a day, but they invariably time their hunger strikes for Tony's visits.)

Most prisoners he'll see are guilty of some effort to defraud somebody of something. But that doesn't really explain why Zimbabwe is in a Canadian prison. She's there because she tried to kill me. And since I'm telling you this, you know she didn't succeed.

Her name's not really Zimbabwe, of course. She was born into a middle class family in Philadelphia as Sally Breeson. But in her late teens, as she developed a unique African-American voice and began appearing publicly as a performing poet, she decided "Sally Breeson" was a lie; it must have been a hand-me-down name from some slave-owner. Despite the pleas of her parents she legally changed her name to Mtoli Karaywa. At first, her parents refused to call her anything but Sally. But her unwillingness to respond convinced her mother to make an effort.

In the late 1970s as the nation of Rhodesia went from white minority to black majority rule, commentators began referring to it by its new name, Zimbabwe. As Sally's mother heard the name more often, she decided she liked its sound and found it easier to pronounce than Mtoli Karaywa. She would call her daughter Zimbabwe. Sally was pleased by her mother's effort to acknowledge her right to define herself. (In a strange pique of contrariness, Sally's father began calling her Rhodesia.)

It was as Zimbabwe that she became known as a performing poet. She was articulate and able to frame her rage against the injustices of 1980s America in cadences that had audiences, both black and white, chanting with her. Some of her most popular pieces were "Every Seven Minutes" about the incidence of rape, or "Smooth Black Pearls" about the lack of appreciation for black women's contributions to American society. She was dynamic and attracted large crowds wherever she performed. She was invited to appear at Yale and Harvard. She developed a following that was more than a cult but less than a political movement

So, what happened? How could she wind up in the Metro West detention center, waiting for Tony's visit?

I met Zimbabwe in Philadelphia when I had just returned from Africa and was looking for a means to voice my own poetic leanings. Like her, I had grown up in Philadelphia, and after a two-year stint in Chad in the Peace Corps, I was at loose ends to figure out what to do with my life. I had seen incredible poverty in Chad, and although I felt good about my years of service teaching mathematics at a village high school, I felt I had to do something more to share what I had witnessed, and what I had come to regard as my ignoble affiliation with a spiritless, corrupt Western civilization. That is to say, I wanted to be a rebel.

One night I wandered into London's, a smoky downtown bar that allowed poets to take over every Tuesday. As I stumbled through the darkness to find a seat, Zimbabwe was on stage in the middle of "Every Seven Minutes." A big woman, barrel-wide, with gleaming black skin and eyes that cut through the smoke, she wore an Afro hair style that tripled the size of her head and translated as "Don't even think of messing with me."

She always had her poems memorized, freeing her to fix her eyes on the audience. There was nothing impeding Zimbabwe's connection to her audience: no papers, no

microphone, nothing. I wanted to find a seat but my eyes were riveted. I couldn't concentrate. She was coming at me, locking her eyes with mine. Like a man whose life flashes in front of him before dying, I stopped in the middle of the crowd and stared back as Zimbabwe circled closer. As she reached the final lines, the audience took up the refrain:

“A Woman Is Broken,	Every Seven Minutes
Her Womb is Trashed,	Every Seven Minutes
Fleshy Thighs Smokin’,	Every Seven Minutes
He Flicks The Ash,	Every Seven Minutes
That Burns Her Heart,	Every Seven Minutes
Murders Her Dream,	Every Seven Minutes
Sparks Her To Cry,	Every Seven Minutes
She Ain’t Never Been,	Every Seven Minutes.”

As she reached the final line she was on top of me, her Afro shrouding my pale face in darkness. Everyone was looking at us. It was an electric moment, this lost white boy peering at this black queen mother singing out about the pain of being who she is, of who all women are.

As Zimbabwe cried out, “She Ain’t Never Been,” I screamed “She Lives!” and buried my head in her heaving chest. She cradled my head as I began to weep uncontrollably. It was as if we had done this a thousand times before, as a finely choreographed ending to her wail: a man in weakness, recognizing his faults, crumbling into her strength. It was a coda for the poem the audience loved, offering not just a plaint about the plight of women, but a symbolic next step toward re-building the relationship between the sexes.

After that first night, each time she performed “Every Seven Minutes” I—or in my rare absence, some other man—would cry out the “She Lives!” line and collapse into Zimbabwe. It became an item of status among the male poets to be the one collapsing. Some offered me money, drinks or other favors to stay away from the bar so they might get a chance.

Zimbabwe and I began collaborating on a series of poems. We traveled the city and wowed them wherever we went. People found the image compelling of this big, black woman with the Africanized name and “big hair” juxtaposed with this little shrimp of a white man, poetizing together. We became a symbol of how the races in Philadelphia could work together to create something noble and lasting; some of our most popular works included “When Black Poets Congregate” and “Poetry Is A Mortal Art.”

There were inevitable rumors that we were lovers, which Zimbabwe encouraged even though there was no foundation for them. She thought people were more attentive if they believed there was a physical relationship between us. So we flirted on stage and made it seem like something it wasn't.

Through Zimbabwe I became a rebel, for a time. No matter what has happened since, I will always be grateful to her for that. But then it happened—something which neither of us at the time fully understood, but which set us on a collision course in Toronto a dozen years later.

Zimbabwe fell in love with a bricklayer named Lamont. She'd met him at a construction site and soon he was a regular at London's, even though he didn't know his free verse from his limericks. In the beginning, while puzzled by our performance, Lamont seemed quite accepting. He even seemed to understand Zimbabwe's claim that our flirtations helped the act. But with each passing week, Lamont seemed to say less to me and treat me with a more visceral scorn. When I complained to Zimbabwe, she accused me of being jealous. One night it all came apart.

Zimbabwe and I were performing our poem "Georgia Colors," about the child murders in Atlanta. Lamont swaggered into London's late and immediately charged toward us. We continued the poem, but the menacing look in Lamont's eye as he neared the stage made us both nervous. Just as we reached the final lines,

"Georgia clay, Red running redder,
Running redder with the blood of children,
Dead to the red, running redder"

Lamont whipped out a revolver and began firing. At first, the audience thought it was part of the act, a gun shooting blanks as a visual emphasis of the poem's violence. But as he swung the gun at eye level and bottles started smashing and glasses falling, the crowd pushed its way out of London's. Luckily, no one was hurt, and Max, the barman, was able to wrestle Lamont to the floor and take the gun away. Incredibly, Zimbabwe had not moved. As the crowd fled (and I along with it), Zimbabwe had finished the poem, punctuated as it was by the gunshots. Later she would claim that any true artist would have stayed, would have "disarmed" Lamont through our art. No matter how I argued, Zimbabwe said my flight indicated "bad artistic faith." She and I never performed together again. Within weeks I stopped writing poetry and ceased any involvement in the performing arts.

* * *

Over the years, I would hear occasionally of Zimbabwe's work and readings. I went off to graduate school and joined the Foreign Service. Frankly, I never expected to see Zimbabwe again. Then one day, a guard at the consulate said there was someone who wanted to see me. When I asked the name, the guard said: "She said to tell you 'Zimbabwe'." I froze.

When I came downstairs, she rose to greet me. The Afro was gone, her hair cropped short and stylish, but she was still a very big woman, and as we shook hands, her heavy earrings clanged. She said, "Thanks for seeing me."

“Of course.”

“That’s some suit you’re wearing,” she commented.

“Just the requisite uniform for this job. What brings you to Toronto?”

She seemed to be surveying the entryway to the consulate, like she was trying to imagine how the floor plan looked and how many guards she could count.

“Oh, just some personal business,” she finally answered.

“Are you giving a reading here? At the university?”

“No, but if I were, would you have come?” She hunched forward almost as though she expected a negative answer.

“Sure,” I said. “I would come to hear you.”

“Can we go outside and talk? I won’t take up much of your time. It’s a little claustrophobic in here, what with the guards and all.”

As we walked past the metal detector to stroll along University Avenue, the guard handed Zimbabwe her purse, a big brown leather bag that looked Moroccan.

“I needed to see you again,” she began.

“After all this time I have to say I’m surprised.”

There were throngs of people hurrying toward downtown Toronto. They sidestepped around us since we were ambling so slowly.

“I remember you as that little white-boy poet. It’s quite a shock to see you as a diplomat.”

“It’s been a long time since I wrote poetry,” I answered

“You had such talent. Does the government appreciate you?”

“It appreciates different talents I have developed over these years.”

She stopped walking and turned to face me. “So you don’t write any longer?”

“Nothing creative.”

“That’s a shame.” She took a few steps forward again and I matched her. “You don’t blame me, do you?”

“No. That’s water under the dam.” As soon as I said it, I knew it didn’t sound right, but before I could correct my mistake, Zimbabwe said, “Well, I blame *you*.”

“For what?” I asked, incredulous that she could harbor any feelings about me after all this time.

“For what you took away from me.” She positioned herself in front of me and I took a half-step back. “We had become something important, and then you were gone. I was at my best with you, and I have never achieved that same level of com-mu-ni-ca-tion.” She stretched the word out so that it lasted five beats.

“There was a little incident with a gun and Lamont and your accusations that I was not a true artist. Don’t you remember?”

She turned her back to me and took a few steps away. She seemed to be looking down at the uneven sidewalk. I moved beside her. A couple rushing past bumped into her and she glared at them. We resumed walking.

“I remember trying to make you a better poet, trying to help you grow into a more complete person. And I remember your giving up. And now, look at you. Aren’t you ashamed?”

I stopped walking and stared at her. “No. Not at all. This is my life now. Look, what is this all about?”

She smiled and we both jumped at a taxi’s horn that beeped right beside us. She turned to face me. “When I heard you were in Toronto and I knew I was coming, for personal reasons, I thought it was fate. I brought something to show you.”

Zimbabwe reached into her purse and pulled out a revolver.

“See this?” she asked.

“You can’t be carrying a gun around like that. This is Canada.”

“What does that mean?” Do you know this is the same gun Lamont fired that day? I’ve held it all these years, slept with it under my pillow long after Lamont was gone.”

“Mtoli, put it away. People are pointing at us.”

“Think I care? Now, if you were still a poet, you could disarm me through your art. But what a shame, you’re not.”

“You’re nuts. I’m going back to the consulate.”

I turned and began the walk back up University Avenue. I have to admit I was scared turning my back on her, but I assured myself she wouldn't use the gun in front of so many witnesses. Then, just as I detected that voice—still so strong and demanding of attention—repeating those last words of “Georgia Colors:”

“Georgia clay, Red running redder
Running redder with the blood of children,
Dead to the red, running redder”

I felt the sting. Like most people, I didn't believe I had been hit until I saw the blood. Then I was on the ground and from what they told me later, unconscious for a long time.

A crowd grabbed Zimbabwe and wrestled away the gun. They say she put up an incredible fight, slugging a number of men so hard they had to be hospitalized. Nobody's sure exactly when her trial will be. Tony claims every time he visits her, she asks him to transmit a message to me. The message is always the same six words. He doesn't even write it down any more:

“All true art meets in blood.”

I know that when Tony comes back this afternoon, he'll tell me he was able to get her to start eating again. He'll give me the same six-word message and I will go home tonight and again collapse into Zimbabwe.

For more content written by Michael Varga read:

[*Suddenly Sundered: HIV and the Foreign Service*](#) First Published in [The Gay & Lesbian Review](#)

[*Diplomatic Detours*](#), 2018, Michael Varga. First published in *Plus Magazine*.

End of interview