

BARBARA H. NIELSEN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is December 16, 2004. This is an interview with Barbara H. Nielsen. It's being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

NIELSEN: I was born in Buffalo, New York outside of the city proper, July 8, 1949.

Q: Let's get a little bit of background. Where did the Nielsens come from?

NIELSEN: Nielsen is my married name; my maiden name is Haven. My father's family was from different parts of Pennsylvania. He grew up in Pittsburgh, as did my mother. They moved to Buffalo before I was born.

Q: What was your father doing?

NIELSEN: He worked in private industry as a quality control engineer.

Q: Had he gone to university?

NIELSEN: Yes, he was a graduate of Carnegie Tech in those days, now Carnegie Mellon. He majored in math and didn't actually pursue a career in mathematics, but that was what his degree was in.

Q: What was your mother's family name and where did they come from?

NIELSEN: They were from Pennsylvania. She was born in Pittsburgh and grew up there. I don't recall what year, in fact, but she lived with her family in Buffalo during the war certainly and I think they had moved up before then.

Q: Did she work or was she at home?

NIELSEN: She stayed at home for most of the time I was growing up and then went to work part-time after I graduated from high school.

Q: Did you grow up and spend your youth in Buffalo?

NIELSEN: In Eggertsville, which is probably the closest suburb to the city of Buffalo in the town of Amherst.

Q: What was the town of Amherst like when you were a kid?

NIELSEN: It was very peaceful. This was the '50s. This particular suburb of the city was probably 99% white ethnically. There was a good mix of various ethnicities. Buffalo is a working class town, so people in the suburbs were probably of a great variety of ethnic backgrounds. There weren't many recent immigrants at that time. I think the city has welcomed a lot of immigrants since then, but in the '50s, it was a very middle class enclave where we didn't grow up with schoolmates who were African-American or Hispanic either.

Q: Did you enjoy school? What were your favorite subjects?

NIELSEN: I always enjoyed school. I was an only child and so reading was a good pastime for someone who didn't have a lot of social distractions at home. I think certainly in the early years I enjoyed all subjects. Later it became clear that I was going to be more of a liberal arts person than one interested in science.

Q: Do you recall any of the early books that you read that stick in your mind?

NIELSEN: In those early years, I read a lot of books, and enjoyed the Nancy Drew series and biographies of women like Juliet Low, Anne Frank, and Helen Keller.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

NIELSEN: I went to Amherst Central, a public high school. Typical of its day, the size was a school of about 1400 students, which today might be considered a little bit small, but at that time it was sizeable. It was very reflective of the geographic area.

Q: You were there from when?

NIELSEN: I graduated in 1967.

Q: So it would be '63 to '67. Did you get involved in any particular activities in high school?

NIELSEN: I was interested in languages. In those days, if you were going to study an exotic language, it would be French. Today that would be considered not exotic. So I studied French and Spanish. I was active in the French Honor Society and the international club and I was interested in things international, such as meeting exchange students. It was of interest to get to know them. At one time, I thought I would like to be an exchange student. I didn't end up doing that, but it was the kind of thing that was attractive to me.

Q: How much did the outside world intrude, reading papers, news, that sort of thing?

NIELSEN: Well, of course, it was the years of the Vietnam War and a lot was going on in the early '60s. Civil rights were in the news. I was not politically active or particularly involved in any of the movements of change. I say that with some regret. I guess I should have been a little more cognizant of the big issues.

Q: I think it depended an awful lot on where you were and circumstances. Being in the Buffalo area, how were the winters?

NIELSEN: Winters are notable. They start early and they end late and you have plenty of snow. That was normal for me growing up. I didn't realize that there were places that you didn't have to have snow on Thanksgiving. But sure, we were not bothered by it. I think to this day, the city of Buffalo, to its credit, knows how to remove snow. They get out there and take care of it. So, you have very few snow days, fewer than here in Virginia, for example. The kids enjoy it. It isn't an impediment to most things in life.

Q: Was politics talked about at the table or was your family interested in politics? Where did they fall if they were?

NIELSEN: Yes. Looking back, we would probably... I've always been described as "low key." I guess much to my chagrin, I would love to be described as "vibrant" and "outgoing," but that's not really the case and I think my family is similar in temperament and quiet, low key people, participating in politics but not really taking a leadership role in local organizations. I'm sure my parents voted regularly and had their preferences. They were probably Republican. But it wasn't a big issue for them.

Q: While you were at school, did the Cold War intrude at all? Was this something you were looking at?

NIELSEN: Yes. I was certainly aware of it. I can remember at one point writing to the soviet embassy for information and receiving a copy of "Soviet Life," the equivalent to our USIA magazines. It was a source of interest. One of my French teachers was of Ukrainian extraction. I can remember her being very adamant that the Ukraine was a captive nation. Every year, she would be a part of the captive nations celebration in downtown Buffalo. This was a reality, but it wasn't something that impinged on my daily life.

Q: By '67, what were you pointed towards? Did you know where you wanted to go?

NIELSEN: I thought I wanted to study languages. I went to Middlebury College and majored in French.

Q: Middlebury is the place when you think of language studies.

NIELSEN: Right, and that was true at the time. I came to realize that, of course, what gave the college its premier reputation was the existence of the summer schools. Those still thrive. They've added quite a number of languages since I was there. As an undergraduate, you can certainly do very well majoring in foreign languages, but the other departments would be probably equally as strong. It's a good liberal arts college. I guess I studied primarily liberal arts there.

Q: Any particular area of liberal arts?

NIELSEN: Languages. I did French and Spanish and a little bit of German. I was clearly interested in languages without necessarily having a concrete idea of what I'd end up doing.

Q: Did you get any foreign travel in during that time?

NIELSEN: I spent a junior year in France.

Q: Where were you studying?

NIELSEN: We were based in Paris. The first month, I learned that the French school year begins in November, not in September. So we had six weeks of cultural studies in Biarritz, which was very pleasant. It gave us some insights into another part of France that was very different from the urban Paris. One of the striking things for a young American at that point was how the memory of the war was still very fresh in people's minds. Okay, I can readily understand that now. 1969 was only 25 years from the end of World War II. At the time, it seemed very odd to me that people were still remembering that long ago war. The pro-American sentiment was palpable and especially in places like Biarritz and the smaller towns in the south of France, where I guess the American presence had been a very positive thing. We were feted with the Vin d'Honneur, which as teenagers we didn't particularly appreciate: neither the wine nor the function perhaps, but it was something the French wanted to do to show their gratitude.

Q: When were you there?

NIELSEN: '69-'70.

Q: Were the events of '68 still around?

NIELSEN: Fortunately, for our academic year, we didn't have any problem with the fact that the previous year had been a lost year for French students. They didn't have sufficient classes. If you were studying in the French system, you would have lost a year. So, the spirit was very much alive. You could begin to see changes in the educational system which were long overdue and a good thing. From a pragmatic point of view, it was good to be away '69-'70 because that's when our own campuses were very much disrupted in many areas of the country by our own protests and demonstrations. Essentially I missed both of the protests, but you could see the aftermath in France and then I came back to the aftermath in the U.S.

Q: What were you gathering from what you saw and heard later when you were in France? What happened at Middlebury? How did it react to the years of protests which were in the late '60s/early '70s?

NIELSEN: It was more low key than most colleges. Middlebury was still isolated. ROTC existed on campus. People were not particularly opposed. I don't think they easily recruited students, but there were some who chose to do that. They weren't driven off by student protests. Today, there is no ROTC on Middlebury's campus, so I don't know the evolution. I think it just became unpopular and so the decision was made to drop it but probably not as an immediate consequence of anti-war protests but rather kind of a gradual withering away.

Q: Did you have any idea of what you wanted to do when you got out?

NIELSEN: I really didn't have any idea. I liked the idea of working internationally and combining an interest in language and cultures. My first thought was, okay, I could be a teacher. I did apply for the Fulbright program. There is still now a teacher exchange at that level for students... Just immediately after you finish college, you could be the equivalent of a teaching assistant in France. I applied for that, but wasn't successful in the competition, so I didn't end up teaching French until graduate school later on. That was a very short-lived experience as well.

Q: You went to graduate school?

NIELSEN: I did. From Middlebury, I went to Indiana University and got a degree in library science, which was very nice. I had always enjoyed studying. I've had as many opportunities as anyone could hope for and I've tried to take advantage of them, but I must say that being a student from time to time is really a fun thing to do. I've studied library science, which normally would lead to a career somewhere in libraries. At the end of the day, I decided to join the Peace Corps. I did work as a librarian for two years in Katmandu, Nepal under Peace Corps auspices.

Q: What brought you to the Peace Corps?

NIELSEN: Actually, while I was a student at Indiana, I applied for the Foreign Service. I took the written exam. Then I took the oral exam. I have vague recollections of that experience. Two things happened that day. George Wallace was shot in Chicago. That's where I was. I did not pass the oral exam. I think the interview panel was very kind and gently suggested that maybe a little bit of experience would be good for me before I should try to join the Foreign Service. So, that's what I did. The Peace Corps seemed like a good route and exercised my interest and put some skills to use. I had hoped to go to West Africa, francophone West Africa, but the government in its wisdom tends to send you to some unlikely places and they decided to send me to Katmandu, Nepal, which worked out fine. It wasn't on my radar screen at the time I got the call.

Q: You weren't a mountain climber.

NIELSEN: No, and I really was... There were many people who desperately wanted to go to Nepal for its scenic beauty and its trekking possibilities. Most of the people in my group would be considered in that category, but I and one other woman were only two women in the group of 5 were not trekkers and we were assigned to the capital.

Q: You were in Nepal from when to when?

NIELSEN: I got there in December 1973. I stayed two years.

Q: Until '75. What was the situation in Nepal at the time you got there?

NIELSEN: It was very peaceful. The monarchy was very much in control. There were some beginnings of disaffection with the monarchy and there was an opposition struggling to make its voice heard but not very effectively at that time. The Maoists that we read about today and for the last 10 years didn't exist. It was certainly no threat to the government. Nepal was not a democracy and so legitimate criticism could be made that their political system was shutting a lot of people out. In any event, it was a peaceful monarch. The monarch was very much in control. Political parties were pretty rudimentary and not very influential.

Q: What sort of living conditions did you have?

NIELSEN: I was privileged in the capital. I rented a room with different families, Nepalese initially, and then I rented a little apartment with a Tibetan family. In that circumstance, I did have running water, which was quite a big deal because you didn't have to go very far before people needed to haul water from the stream. I had running water, though it was cold running water. We didn't have heat either, but I was still very privileged materially. I didn't have a kitchen, so I took my meals in a variety of eateries around town. They were very cheap. You could eat copiously for nothing. You had to expect to be sick a fair amount of the time, which was true, but you did recover. That was the beauty of being young.

Q: Did you learn Nepalese?

NIELSEN: Yes, they speak Nepali, which bears some resemblance to Hindi. It's Indo-European. If you trace Nepali back far enough, it's based on Sanskrit. They use a Devanagari script just like Hindi, so once you can read Hindi, you can read Nepali. It's a language spoken only in Nepal, so most of the Nepalese, when they get some education, they learn both Hindi and English. Higher education is conducted in English, just like Indian higher education.

Q: What were you doing in Nepal?

NIELSEN: I was the reference librarian at Tribhuvan University, which was the only university in Nepal. I don't know what exists today. Maybe they have some additional ones. It's a public university. It was a great privilege to go there. At that time, the literacy rate was five to 10% and even less for girls. Someone who had a secondary education and then was going to college was really an elite. We dealt with the elite and they were modeling their system on U.S. models of education. There was considerable input from USAID and other private NGOs. The textbooks were in English. The Nepali collection would have been in Nepali or other languages, but the undergraduate coursework that was conducted in English was based on U.S. materials as well. So, reference service was not well known and the idea was to establish it. That's what we worked on doing. The librarian at the time, the library director, Shanti Mishra, and her husband were U.S.-trained and they were pioneers in creating academic libraries in the country.

Q: How did you find the students, your contact with them?

NIELSEN: They were very friendly, personable. They weren't accustomed to asking questions, so you had a pedagogical role to bring them in and try to teach them what a library could do for them and then help them get the materials they needed. Also, the faculty was part of our target audience. They, too, would have been trained in another system where probably the professor handed out the class notes, the students memorized those notes, took exams, and there wasn't much attempt to have them do independent research. The idea was to give them some ideas about how they could improve their teaching, improve their research. We worked a lot with the faculty in that field.

Q: Was there much Indian influence from Indian universities?

NIELSEN: Tremendous. Historically if you studied abroad and if you were going to study at a university, you had to study abroad where would you go? It would be India. China is the other neighbor, of course, and the Chinese and the Indians in traditional Nepalese politics were seen as powers to play one off against the other. While the ties were much stronger with India, the Nepalese were certainly flirting with the Chinese as well to make sure that it didn't become the colony of India.

Q: Did you find yourself in the position of an Indian educated faculty kind of resentful of an American librarian?

NIELSEN: Not really. At the time, the Nepalese were open to American assistance, probably not universally, but by and large what I encountered was a receptivity to things American. Young people were happy to have association with Peace Corps volunteers. You were seen first as a Peace Corps volunteer and they thought this was kind of fascinating because the concept was unusual. They recognized that Americans were wealthy beyond their wildest dreams. In fact, they had misperceptions about just how wealthy we were, but by any Nepalese standard, the poorest American was very well-off. So, it intrigued them to think young Americans were giving up something to come to Nepal. The volunteers generally were idealistic, and came with pure motives. These were the early '70s and you had primarily young volunteers without too much baggage and not a lot of experience either. They were perceived as good kids who were there to help and probably did have something to offer, so the welcome was quite genuine.

Q: How about your fellow Peace Corps people? Most of them were out in the hinterland, weren't they?

NIELSEN: They were. You measured your location by how many days walk from the capital two days, three days, seven days if you were really remote. They had a lot of challenges. It was much more difficult to be in the village where you were the only foreigner, no one spoke English, you had to totally modify your diet and your way of life to fit in. Most volunteers did that very successfully. A few of them didn't succeed because of illness. It was easy to become ill. If you were too ill, you couldn't remain out in the village. But most volunteers were successful and kept that balance that you always have to be somewhat conscious of. In spite of all your efforts to understand the culture, you're not going to be Nepalese at the end of the day and you shouldn't expect to be. Most volunteers managed quite well. A few of them went home early. But that wasn't the majority.

Q: Did you have any contact with our embassy?

NIELSEN: Relatively little. On rare occasions, we would be invited. It was a nice thing to be invited to the residence for real food. Carolyn Laise was the ambassador at the time I was there. She was very gracious in hosting us. We had ice cream, which was a treat. I think it was homemade with goat's milk, so it was very rich, very delicious. It was definitely a treat. We also got to meet Ellsworth Bunker, who came over for R&R from Vietnam, I guess, to visit his wife. He didn't tell us what was happening in Saigon. Otherwise, I really don't remember going to the embassy. The USIS person there, Kent Obey, was also very friendly and I did visit the American Center regularly because it had a wonderful library. It was heavily used. The young Nepalese students packed it on a daily basis. Having that experience encouraged me to pursue the Foreign Service again. It was a very positive experience to see how our library program was functioning and the number of Nepalese that were served. It seemed like a very good resource that we were providing.

Q: I think the normal Peace Corps volunteer would be somebody who would have been opposed to the war in Vietnam. Did that permeate... Did they keep that under control when they were abroad? In your training, did you notice this?

NIELSEN: I think the group that I was with were a little more technocratic and therefore their goal was not to protest the war in Vietnam. Their goal was to use skills in forestry and agriculture and library science in a very direct application. Perhaps it was the group that we had. They were not by and large political science majors. They were people with some technical training.

Q: How did you feel this experience was for your library skills?

NIELSEN: It probably did not put you on the cutting edge of library science, but fortunately, when I went to library school, the Internet was not yet in existence and technology was just beginning to be an important part of information science. Today, that has changed totally. We were still book based and print media based. In fact, we even learned cataloguing, which you don't need to do any longer. There are, I guess, a very few who sit at a central locale in Ohio and do cataloguing for the world. So my timing was good in the sense that my library skills were fresh, they were applicable, and they were still after two years not outdated when I came back to the U.S. As it turned out, I didn't actually pursue a career in library science, but I have kept it as an interest and it has been something I've worked with in the Foreign Service.

Q: You left there when?

NIELSEN: I probably got the date wrong. I finished my library science training in '72. Then in December of '72, I went to Nepal. So I was there in '73 and '74 and left November of '74 just short of two years. I gave myself a trip to Greece on the way home, and Geneva, stopped off in a couple places along the way before coming back here at the end of a year in '74.

Q: When you were in Nepal, were you observing the drug culture? Nepal was one of the points where the young people, not just Americans, but European and Australian and Japanese, had their wanderjahr. Nepal was a big place to go in those days.

NIELSEN: Yes, it was. That was something of interest. We met a lot of the young students or young people who came through Katmandu. They would often visit the library. I did meet them in various places. Hashish was legal and there were tea shops where you could go and have brownies laced with hash. The signs would be freely advertising hashish and derivatives. Hard drugs weren't particularly in vogue there. So this was the environment. But we were told quite categorically that any drug use would result in our immediate departure, so that was something to take into account. While using drugs could be legal in Nepal, it wasn't legal once you were there under the aegis of the U.S. government, so it turned out not to be an issue.

Q: I was wondering whether you ran across, particularly young Americans, who got there and sort of settled down to enjoy hashish and became almost besotted with it and became protection and welfare cases. Was there much of that?

NIELSEN: Perhaps. It didn't come to my attention. Since I wasn't doing consular work, it did not come to my attention.

Q: I was just wondering whether it intruded in your life.

NIELSEN: It didn't, and it didn't intrude in the Nepalese culture either. Marijuana grows naturally there. I can recall, one of my language teachers, I visited him at his house and there in the garden was some naturally growing marijuana which was not used for anything. It just grew there like other plants. So the Nepalese were not really big drug users themselves. I think the drug problem became much more severe later in the '80s among the Nepalese as well. I don't have much information, but apparently drugs were one of the reasons that the Crown Prince killed his father and other members of his family.

Q: Did you make good friends with Nepalis? Was there much social interaction?

NIELSEN: Yes. The Nepalese are very hospitable and very friendly. They liked Americans. It was relatively easy to get to know them. You got to know those that you worked with best and those also who were Peace Corps staff or associated with Peace Corps. I did make some friends along those lines and we were always invited to weddings and family gatherings. I have to say, I haven't actually kept up any of those ties. It was easy to get to know them.

Q: When you left there and took your time getting home and seeing something of the world and Greece particularly, what did you do?

NIELSEN: I did f a typical tourist trip in Athens. I was interested to see the ancient monuments, the Parthenon.

Q: This was '74?

NIELSEN: Yes.

Q: You didn't get into trouble?

NIELSEN: No. The military junta was in power at that time.

Q: I was consul general there at the time. I don't recall visiting you in prison.

NIELSEN: And a good thing, too. I think it was on that trip though that I did visit the American embassy in Paris. Anyway, I stayed at a youth hostel in Greece and I served there later as my last post. It amazed me to think that when I visited there, I had no trouble not knowing the language. It was no big deal. I often wondered why that was, because I was staying in a youth hostel and eating in down scale restaurants..

Q: There is a whole strata... They've been dealing with tourists for centuries.

NIELSEN: That's true. At that time, I also wanted to stop off in Geneva because I was interested in UNESCO. I thought I'd apply to work there, which I did. While I was there, I was going to look around and get a feel for Geneva. I also stopped off in Paris, to visit the family that I had stayed with as a student. I think that was the only time where I was careless enough to lose my wallet. That allowed me to pay a visit to the embassy that I hadn't planned on and learned first hand that, "Well, you know, we really can't help indigent Americans. You can apply to your family and friends for money," but I just went home.

Q: So you went back to the U.S. This would have been when?

NIELSEN: By then it's December of '74.

Q: Did you have any plans for what you were going to do?

NIELSEN: No, I guess I didn't have good plans. I was going to see what the world could do for me at that point. I should say, I was naïve enough when I joined the Peace Corps that I thought, well, the world wasn't beating a path to my doorstep to offer me a particular job, so I would leave the country and join the Peace Corps. When I returned, the world still wasn't making a path to my door to offer me a fantastic job, so I decided that it was time to go back to school, and I did. I went to the University of Buffalo. That was handy. I could live at home. I studied French. I taught French as a graduate assistant. Then in the fall of '75, I transferred to the graduate program at Yale, still in French, thinking, "Well, I guess, I'll do a Ph.D. in French."

Q: So did you pursue a Ph.D. in French?

NIELSEN: I did. But in the back of my mind was the idea that I still would like to join the Foreign Service, so I took the exam. While I was in school, I did the interview and then had to decide whether I wanted to join the Foreign Service or to continue in graduate school. I determined that at the time, and I got some advice about it, that the prospect of landing a tenure-track job in French in 1976 wasn't all that rosy. A lot of people with Ph.D.s were driving cabs.

Q: French is a pretty... There is probably only one tenured position in French at most schools.

NIELSEN: Probably. The need wasn't critical. In terms of literary analysis, I realized, since I was doing some of that, that it kind of had a negative effect on me. I wasn't enamored of deconstruction.

Q: Deconstruction, this odious thing, started as a French concoction.

NIELSEN: That's right, yes, and some of the greats were there at Yale. I took classes from some of them, but I really didn't like it and I had the sense that I enjoyed literature but they were destroying it with this methodology. So, I was to some degree pushed by that to pursue something else and attracted at the same time to the Foreign Service, which seemed to be a combination of theory and practice. You're supposed to be thinking from time to time but you're also doing and accomplishing things. You have programs that you run and so on.

Q: Do you recall any of the questions that were asked in your second oral exam?

NIELSEN: Thankfully, no, I don't. I'm not even sure who was on the panel. Foolishly, I guess I wasn't particularly nervous. It seemed like just another conversation. It has probably become much more of a grueling exercise now than it was then because A) it lasted less time and-

Q: This was when?

NIELSEN: This was the spring of '76. The written would have been in the fall of '75.

Q: I was giving the exam in those days. Three people.

NIELSEN: That's right. I took it here in Rosslyn.

Q: My memory's not that great.

NIELSEN: I remember Betsy Fitzgerald was on my panel.

Q: Betsy was the USIA woman representative. If we were interviewing a woman, we always made sure we had a woman. She was a ball of fire.

NIELSEN: That's right. I liked her.

Q: I really liked her.

NIELSEN: I do not recall any of the other panel members, even if I knew the names at the time. But, of course, I was interested in USIA and in those days you did have to make a selection as you took the exam.

Q: So you didn't finish your Ph.D.?

NIELSEN: I didn't.

Q: You would have been a French deconstructioner if you had finished it.

NIELSEN: I might have. I probably wouldn't have enjoyed that, so all's well that ends well.

Q: So when did you come into the Foreign Service?

NIELSEN: I actually joined in May of 1976.

Q: What was your entry class like?

NIELSEN: There were 13 of us in USIA, evenly divided between men and women. I was on the younger side. Our average age was 29. I was a bit younger than that. The oldest member of our class was a high school teacher. I think he was 45 years old. We all thought that was unusual. We had one woman in the class who had been born in Cuba. That was interesting. Four individuals of the 13 were married to one another in the class; i.e. we had two tandem couples. A couple of those 13 individuals didn't last more than about a year, probably the normal rate of attrition as well.

Q: Did you have any idea where you wanted to serve or what you wanted to do?

NIELSEN: I thought I would like to do cultural affairs in Paris. Why not?

Q: Let's bring a little American culture to the heathen out there.

NIELSEN: Yes. I was interested in using my French. I do recall that the bid list did not have Paris. There were only two francophone positions. One was Kinshasa and the other was Brussels. I think USIA in its wisdom didn't send me to either one. The Brussels job was actually NATO. They probably didn't think I was an especially good fit for NATO. I would agree with that at the time. As for Kinshasa, I think someone was being kind to me in not sending me to Kinshasa. In those days, too, rumor had it that single women often were sent to Latin America because you didn't have to invest a lot in their language training and they might get married shortly anyway. In keeping with that stereotype, I was sent to Montevideo.

Q: You were in Montevideo from '76 to when?

NIELSEN: I got there in '77. It ended up being a 13 month assignment. I'm not sure what the norm was. They kept changing that. For my predecessors, it was a JOT assignment and you were either to stay on at post and go into a regular slot or, if there wasn't one, then you would be moved after usually 18 months. But in my case, they moved me after 13 months for whatever reason. I didn't actually finish my rotation. I guess I should go back and do it. I was cheated out of my consular rotation. I never did do consular affairs.

Q: Let's talk a bit about Uruguay. What was it like when you went there in '77?

NIELSEN: It was in the throes of the military regime. The Tupamaros were under control by then. There was still some concern about those urban terrorists, but they were largely subdued. At the same time, human rights were a problem between our governments.

Q: Jimmy Carter had just come in.

NIELSEN: Yes. We were making strong statements about support for human rights and Uruguay was a place where you could feel that those statements were justified. That was the work of the political section at that time. They were taking a lot of complaints on behalf of individuals who thought that they had been tortured or otherwise their human rights were abused.

From the point of view of a cultural affairs officer, which was what I was doing, it was a very fine place to be. We had a binational center there with a full program of cultural events. Those were still the days when we brought cultural groups to perform. We had a great library, one of the models in Latin America. I was allowed to teach American literature in our program there. All in all, it was a great place. The culture and society were... One thing that a military regime does is create order, so it was very orderly. The Uruguayans tended to be fairly subdued anyway. It was an easy place to live. The middle class was in decline, but they still hung on to a decent standard of living. They were fine counterparts.

Q: You had military dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil at the same time.

NIELSEN: Yes, not to mention Chile, of course.

Q: The Tupamaros were essentially college students, weren't they? Where were they coming from?

NIELSEN: Most of them were middle class bourgeois family young people who were caught up in the Marxist ideology of the time.

Q: But you say they were pretty well under control?

NIELSEN: Yes. I never met one. They weren't holding rallies or demonstrations or doing anything at all.

Q: On your side of the cultural work, did the opposition to the military play any role? Were you getting protests?

NIELSEN: I don't remember any specific incidents. I suspect that there was a high degree of control. We were not so far as I can recall a venue for the opposition. I was there for a year, but I don't remember, for example, that we were trying to help artists who wanted to protest against their government. I don't think they were doing that.

Q: What were we doing?

NIELSEN: In terms of what?

Q: Our USIA function.

NIELSEN: We were running exchanges programs. My job was in large measure working at the binational center where we were modeling modern library practices and doing English teaching. Within the framework of English teaching, we were teaching American culture. We actually had a certificate program so that students could receive a qualification in American studies. That was one of our big emphases, English teaching, librarianship, cultural events. I'm trying to think of examples of what we had on the cultural events side. I think that was where we had a dance troupe. We did bring musical groups and dance groups, theater groups occasionally if they spoke Spanish. There was a big avant garde troupe that we brought and which was very successful there.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

NIELSEN: Ernest Siracusa.

Q: He was one of our major hands in Latin America.

NIELSEN: That's right. He was a motorcycle aficionado and old car aficionado. He was the ambassador initially. Then Lawrence Pezzullo succeeded him.

Q: Did they have much interest in the USIS work there?

NIELSEN: It probably wasn't their highest priority. The USIS program you could say was traditional in the best sense. We were doing what we had always done, the kind of program we should do and of course do have to justify periodically, things like exchanges, the IV program...

Q: The exchange and IV programs are so important. It's long term, but they really work very well.

NIELSEN: They do. They're hard to quantify. It doesn't always mean that someone that you send on an IV becomes your friend, but it usually means they've learned something. That's definitely helpful when you want to dialogue with them later on. So, the program there was based on the traditional USIA offerings. It was the beginning of the decline of resources for USIA back in '77. Budgets were palpably being cut. Positions were being cut. We could see that 30 years later, USIA disappears, so it was definitely on the downward slope even then in terms of magnitude and personnel.

Q: What about the social life? How did you find the Uruguayans?

NIELSEN: Uruguayans were unpretentious. They were easy to talk to, easy to make friends with. They didn't have the arrogance of the Argentines, for example. I liked the Uruguayans. Many years later, we had an Uruguayan babysitter for our infant son when we lived in Arlington.. I think they're wonderful people. They have all the warmth of Latins, but they're sensible, they're very middle class, they're cultivated, they are warm.

Q: Do they look to the United States rather than Europe for study abroad?

NIELSEN: It's hard to generalize. In terms of where they would see their future, yes, they were looking to the U.S. Granted, they had a cultural heritage from Europe, Spain in particular. So their journalism, for example, was heavily patterned after Spanish journalism. But studying English was very popular and was viewed as a good way to advance your career especially if you were interested in business or economics, liberal arts.

Q: You mentioned a baby. Did you acquire a significant other anywhere along the way or did this come later on?

NIELSEN: I met my husband in Honduras.

Q: So this comes later on.

NIELSEN: This comes after Uruguay. The Uruguayan babysitter was 1987.

Q: After 13 months in Uruguay, whither?

NIELSEN: Tegucigalpa. It's going to be hard for the current generation to understand this, but in those days a phone call from Washington was a big deal. You kind of trembled whenever Washington was calling. By the way, Washington is a very common first name in Uruguay. The Uruguayans had admiration for George Washington. Even modern Uruguayans have given their children the name of Washington as a first name. So there were quite a few of them on our staff. But when Washington called, meaning headquarters, it was usually a cause for fear and trembling. Thus, there was a fateful day when out of the blue Washington called and told me I was going to Tegucigalpa in three weeks. My first question had to be, "Well, where is that?" It turns out it's Honduras. It was a very nice place as well. I had no role in the selection of my onward assignment and that was normal in those days. You just got a call and off you went.

Q: So you went to Honduras from '78...

NIELSEN: I arrived in February of '78. I was there until April of '81.

Q: What was Honduras like? What was the political-economic situation in '78?

NIELSEN: It, too, had a military regime. It used to change its military leader with some frequency, but it did so peacefully. You'd have a bloodless coup and wake up the next day with a new general in charge. Unlike Uruguay, the big contrast was the level of education and development. Honduras was very much a third world country whereas Uruguay was a second world country. Tegucigalpa was much less economically developed. AID was a big part of our mission there. Peace Corps was also a big part of the mission in Honduras. So, you were dealing on a very different level. The director of the university had a BA and he was considered highly educated. Anyone in that society who had a college degree flaunted it. They would use the honorific "licenciado," which means they graduated from college. That was an accomplishment. That said, it was a rather nice place to be a junior officer. You could be a somewhat bigger fish in a small pond, have some budget that you would oversee and have control over, a small staff that you would manage, and very easy access to the leaders of the country - at least the leaders in the cultural and educational field, which is what I was doing there. Of course, it was also a very hospitable place. Anywhere you went, you were treated with distinction.

Q: Was there any revolt or disturbances at that time out in the hinterland?

NIELSEN: Not much. There was anti-American sentiment present. Central America has a history of some negative feeling toward us. Honduras was the home of Standard Fruit operations up on the coast. University students could be expected to have some negative reaction to our policies at that time, both historically and current policies. I was there during the Nicaraguan revolution which we supported in a way, but we weren't thrilled with the Marxist regime that took over from Somoza. But I was there only at the incipient stages of the Contra-

Q: The Contra thing really got going somewhat later.

NIELSEN: When I left in '81, we didn't have anything like the military presence that we had later.

Q: Reagan had not appeared. He just had been elected.

Who was the ambassador while you were there?

NIELSEN: Mari-Luci Jaramillo. She was a very fine educator, "goodwill" ambassador, a political appointee. It was still a time when you could have a "goodwill" ambassador and that person could succeed and could carry out U.S. policy quite adequately.

Q: What was her background?

NIELSEN: She was a professor of education from New Mexico. Her husband accompanied her, so that was something of an adjustment for him in a macho society to be the husband of the ambassador, but I think she was very successful and very well liked there. She was succeeded by Jack Binns. At that time, things were becoming a little more difficult politically and he was brought in to take a harder line with the Honduran government. I can't remember who the Honduran president was at that point.

Q: They kept changing.

NIELSEN: They kept changing. I can remember the first two generals, General Melgar and then Policarpo Paz Garcia. Paz Garcia was notable because he was an army general - I guess he had won fame in the very brief "soccer war" with El Salvador - but he was not highly educated. In fact, he was a third grade graduate, so you didn't look to him for great vision. During those years, El Salvador was in some turmoil. It was not sufficiently safe to travel to San Salvador, though you could travel to some other parts of the country.. Neighboring Guatemala was okay to travel to, but they were also having trouble with civil unrest, such that Honduras was the peaceful country in the region.

Q: What type of work were you doing?

NIELSEN: Cultural work. I was the cultural attaché^{1/2} and there was no assistant, so I did exchanges, English teaching, libraries, binational center, cultural presentations. I also met my husband there. He was the English teaching fellow who came down to work in the binational center.

Q: What is his background?

NIELSEN: He did his studies in teaching English as a second language. He was a freshly-minted graduate and USIA had this program for recent TOEFL graduates, largely to staff binational centers in Latin America. We had two binational centers, one in San Pedro Sula and one in Tegucigalpa and he was assigned to the one in the capital.

Q: I take it Honduras was a pretty poor country.

NIELSEN: Definitely. It really had no industry to speak of. I guess it still doesn't. It relies on its agricultural production, coffee, bananas, pineapple.

Q: Who was coming to your binational centers? Were there good target audiences? One thinks of some of those countries particularly at that time and 10-12 families run the place.

NIELSEN: Unlike the polarization in El Salvador and in Nicaragua, Honduras didn't suffer from that to the same degree. The ruling class, in the case of the military, was composed of people who were not very wealthy, like General Paz Garcia.. The generals were from the lower class. Overall, there were relatively few wealthy Hondurans. The middle class did have some opportunities to get an education and if they were professionals, they could live a decent middle class existence, not so impressive by our current standards perhaps, but for the most part you just didn't have this terrible disparity between the rich and the poor.

They had two political parties, which did not differ a great deal. You belonged to the party that your family had belonged to for generations. They alternated government.

Q: The Whites and the Blues?

NIELSEN: Yes, they were the Nacionales and the Colorados, but they weren't very ideological. Generally, you were born into one or the other and you just kept that affiliation. So, in that sense, they weren't ripe for civil war and they didn't have an oligarchy. They have actually progressed to democracy now.

Q: Did you have any particular target groups? What about the college students?

NIELSEN: Sure, we worked with a lot with students, with young professionals as well. The natural audience is always the young professional class, some of whom had studied in the U.S. and others who wanted to study in the U.S., so the Fulbright program was a big draw for those folks along with the short term technical training that AID used to do. That was a real avenue for upward mobility for enterprising Hondurans. If you worked with the Americans, there would be opportunities to go to the U.S., get trained, and come back. Obviously the universities were targets. We also worked a lot with the arts community.

Q: I take it the military was beyond your problems?

NIELSEN: It wasn't part of my portfolio. I'm sure the political section was charged with working with the military and we probably sent many of them for training, but it wasn't a cultural issue. We always worked with the journalists and our other traditional audiences. I remember trying to inculcate a better sense of professionalism. The newspapers there tended to be sensationalistic and tabloid in their approach, which meant that they would plaster the latest traffic accident on the front page. The degree of professionalism was relatively low. We were trying to remedy that and contribute to improvements in journalism. We had a radio section and we used Voice of America radio programming quite a bit there. It was still an environment where local stations needed programming and could benefit by using some of ours.

Q: On the social side, was it a hard society to break into?

NIELSEN: They were very hospitable. There were a number of Americans who would come to Honduras. The prototype is the American man marrying a Honduran woman. That seems to work very well. Why is that? I guess Latin women are good wives, if you will. The reverse doesn't tend to be the case. It tends to be very rare for an American woman to marry a Honduran. It happens, of course. In part, it's because, at least at that time, Honduras was a machistic society and educated females were not universally appreciated. Education per se might not be viewed so negatively, but assertive females wouldn't be appreciated. So while it's very easy to have lots of Honduran friends, that's just one level of social interaction; you didn't necessarily feel that these were going to be intimate friends for life.

Q: I interviewed somebody somewhere in Central America that said that at one point a good number of Americans settled along the Caribbean coast and maybe got married, but they were older men who would get younger wives and then they'd die. This became sort of a consular problem.

NIELSEN: Yes, okay.

Q: They may not have been in the same social group that you were in.

NIELSEN: That's right. I can think of an example along those lines. Honduras would be a cheap place to live and it would be an easy place to find a Honduran wife or servant or whatever you wanted, so you could afford to do that. The climate was good. I can see how the phenomenon might occur.

Q: What about United Fruit and the plantation owners? Did you have much contact? How were you seeing that particular relationship there?

NIELSEN: The American fruit companies had departed by the time I got there. Their interests, they either liquidated them or they were in the hands of Hondurans. There were still vestiges of United Fruit. You could see... I can recall visiting a pineapple plantation and the houses for the workers had been built by United Fruit. They created company towns in cities like La Ceiba, where if you worked at United Fruit, you had a good job, you had a good standard of living. You might not have had the freedom to unionize or have all the rights you might want as a laborer, but it was a pretty good existence compared to that of a laborer in a Honduran company. The presence of the American companies was no longer an issue. Their legacy was something that you could debate.

Q: You left there in '81. Where did you go then?

NIELSEN: My next assignment was Algeria.

Q: Finally you're getting to speak some French.

NIELSEN: That's right. Finally, I get to do that.

Q: Today is February 3, 2005. We're in 1981 and you are off to Algeria. You served there from when to when?

NIELSEN: For two years. I can't recall exactly what month we arrived in Algeria, but we were there for roughly two years.

Q: What was your job?

NIELSEN: CAO. There were two USIS officers. It was a small USIS operation and a small embassy for that matter. At that time, we were still under some limitations in terms of what we could do programwise.

Q: What was the situation in Algeria in 1981?

NIELSEN: It was peaceful, relatively speaking. We were enjoying an "era of good feelings" following the resolution of the hostage crisis. The Algerians had played an important facilitative role in that. There was a bit of a rapprochement between the two governments, not that they loved us, but at least we had some areas that we could cooperate in.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

NIELSEN: Michael Newlin.

Q: What sort of things were you doing?

NIELSEN: In the public diplomacy realm, we were doing English teaching, American studies. The Algerians were happy to have us bring our experts in to talk about American literature and about English language teaching. They weren't very interested in any of the other policy fields, American foreign policy or even journalism. We had a very restricted program. We could send some Algerians to the U.S. in the cultural field, university teaching, administration, library science, but there were fairly marked constraints on what we could do.

Q: What was the Algerian government like at that time?

NIELSEN: Suspicious of the West.

Q: Were there lots of controls on their citizens?

NIELSEN: Yes. It was a very difficult environment to get anything done for foreigners and for Algerians, probably more difficult for Algerians actually. There were strict controls on money. You couldn't get hard currency and yet if you were going to travel outside the country, you needed to have access to hard currency, so that was one area. If you wanted to establish a business or engage in commerce, you had to have a lot of permissions. Housing was a big problem. There was insufficient housing, so if you needed some, you had to know someone. What most Algerians did was kind of make do with moving in with relatives, doubling up with friends, but it was a rather harsh society for most people.

Q: I've heard people say that the Algerians were not a very open people.

NIELSEN: Yes, that's right. For whatever historical reason I'm not sure I ever figured it out they were suspicious of one another. They perhaps were no more or no less suspicious of foreigners. They had some ideas of what foreigners were like and they were as friendly to them as they were to their fellow Algerians, and probably a little more so in many cases.

Q: Did the French play any role there?

NIELSEN: Only as a legacy. French was still spoken and the educational system owed a lot to the French. We employed in the embassy a great many third country nationals, some of whom were French. There was a lot of back and forth with France. Some people had French connections and there was a good deal of French influence, but the Algerian government had made a big point to sever a lot of its historical ties. They were Arabizing. The policy was to teach everyone Arabic and to identify with the Arab world and to espouse the causes of their fellow Arabs and to downplay any of their residual ties with the French.

Q: Did teaching English cause a problem? Or as long as it wasn't in French, it was considered a little more benign?

NIELSEN: The Algerians were very francophone and they saw that there was something to be gained by teaching English. It was the language of technology and they were a developing country. They saw their future being brighter if they took advantage of science and technology, and English was a tool to further that goal.

Q: What sort of students were you getting to learn English?

NIELSEN: Young professionals, which was by design. We established at the time I was there the first English teaching program in a long time under embassy auspices. There had been a cultural center cum library which was closed at some point and never reopened. In this vacuum, we did establish an English teaching program on site, inviting the students into our compound there. The students we recruited were professionals. We weren't targeting youth at that point but rather young professionals.

Q: Were there any other cultural activities, films, art shows, that sort of thing? Was this permitted?

NIELSEN: I'm not going to say it was forbidden, but there certainly were no large groups that we sponsored. I don't remember any performing artists. That's not to say there weren't a couple, but it was not a big deal for sure. We didn't have the San Francisco Ballet or anything.

Q: What was the situation with the fundamentalists in Algeria? Now it's stopped everything out of that country.

NIELSEN: They were beginning to be noticed. The government was aware of the nascent organization of the fundamentalists and they were trying to keep them under control. The violence hadn't begun, but people were aware that there were some stirrings of unrest among Islamic fundamentalists.

Q: Did you get any feel for the Algerian press? Who was the public affairs officer?

NIELSEN: The public affairs officer was first, Ed Penny and then, John Archibald. I did not read Arabic, so I didn't read the Algerian press. From what I understood - we had a local employee who made translations of the relevant articles each day so we could keep tabs on the editorialthe press was largely propagandistic. It's not a free press as we would think of one and therefore not particularly worth reading either for most news.

Q: What was the social life like?

NIELSEN: My own experience was fine. I enjoyed the time that I spent there. Virtually any country has something to offer if you're not planning to be there for 10 years. You socialized with other embassy folks. We had a very good, small Anglican church that we attended and had a number of activities that stemmed from that group. The country has a lot of natural beauty, so if you traveled, you could see things that you wouldn't see elsewhere. This was the first time that I had visited the Sahara and the Roman ruins along the coast and some of the really ancient cities for example Constantine and Annaba, the birthplace of St. Augustine. There really was a lot to study. I found that was just fine. My successor also enjoyed her tour there. In her case, she was into sailing and a number of people in the embassy did enjoy that, so if you had a boat or wanted to be on the water, that was also possible.

Q: Were there any incidents or high level visits?

NIELSEN: There were no high level visits. I think relations were not sufficiently strong or friendly. Today you might well have certainly more attention paid. Travel wasn't as easy as it is now. But we didn't really have any high level visits. The closest we came was, the Secretary of State came to neighboring Morocco. I went over there to help. In Algeria itself we didn't even have Marines. They weren't allowed in the country until the very end of the time I was there. When we got our first contingent, it was a big deal.

Q: Was there any problem when Israel invaded Lebanon? This was around '82 or so.

NIELSEN: The massacre at the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps occurred during that period, and it was a major source of criticism. The Algerians blamed us for allowing that to happen. Of course, we were continually criticized for our Israeli and Middle East policy.

Q: Were you able to develop Algerian friends?

NIELSEN: Yes. You would call them professional friends as opposed to really close personal friends. But there were a few people that you got to know on a personal level. The Algerians are hospitable once you somehow establish a rapport with them. There is a stereotype of Arab hospitality and they do practice it as well. They're very generous and welcoming, but it did take some effort. Because of limited supplies of many items, entertaining was quite difficult. Getting the food that you might want was a struggle.

Q: This used to be the breadbasket of Europe.

NIELSEN: Yes, they produced a lot on their farms, but they became importers of virtually everything except petroleum products. And there were shortages, so if you were planning a meal, you had to have lots of contingency plans in the event that you couldn't get eggs or you couldn't get cheese or you couldn't get meat.

Q: Was there a feeling among your colleagues at the embassy and with yourself that here is a country that's got a lot of potential but really has gotten into the wrong hands and the wrong policies and is on a downward trend rather than the reverse?

NIELSEN: Yes, I think we felt that. Clearly they had natural resources and oil wealth, which could have done a lot for their development. But they were inept. They felt that they wanted to model themselves after the socialist economies and societies of Eastern Europe, which, as we now know, was not the right model to choose for a lot of reasons. They stifled the creativity of their own people and drove many of them abroad.

Q: Today, France is full of Algerians. Had that exodus been in place while you were there?

NIELSEN: I think there were probably waves. Following independence, a lot of "Pieds Noirs" returned to France. Those folks might have been in Algeria all their life, but since they had the possibility to go back to France and were culturally French, they chose to leave. The Algerians who studied in France and studied in the U.S., too, in the '60s and '70s, many of them were enthusiastic to come home and try and build their new society. Then, many of them became aware that things were not developing in a very positive way and they would try to leave. That would be the end of the '80s and '90s where you saw another exodus and a very different group going to France in the '80s.

Q: In the circles that you were working with, diplomats and all, did they seem to keep their eye on what was happening in France? Was that where the action was?

NIELSEN: They certainly did, yes. They kept closely in touch with what was going on in France. They were very interested in the U.S., too. The ones we met were interested in the United States and its technology and its education system. I don't recall, and I guess I wouldn't have dealt with the business community particularly, so I'm not sure how they viewed us. Culturally though, they were experimenting with their Arab roots and that made it important for them to develop their ties with other Arab countries, with other third world countries as well. They saw themselves as leaders in that sphere. The U.S. was not their most important partner.

Q: How about American movies and TV? Were they around?

NIELSEN: I'm sure they were. I never went to the cinema there. It was not prohibited, but it wasn't terribly recommended. Women were made to feel uncomfortable if they went. I couldn't tell you when they got recent movies. Of course, they wouldn't have been in English necessarily. They might have been dubbed into French with Arabic subtitles.

Q: You left there in '83. Where did you go?

NIELSEN: I went to Dakar, Senegal.

Q: That must have been more fun.

NIELSEN: Yes, it was a big breath of fresh air actually. Algeria was a dour country, but the experience was valuable and it was certainly interesting to experience Eastern Europe without being quite as heavy-handed as Romania, Bulgaria, or the former Yugoslavia would have been, and the climate was a bit better.

Q: You were in Senegal from '83 to when?

NIELSEN: '86.

Q: What was Senegal like when you arrived there in '83?

NIELSEN: Struggling, unfortunately. Senegal had done a lot of things right. It was a democracy. That's one thing that we want to give them full credit for. They had a very tolerant body politic. They have a lot of different ethnic groups, religious groups, which managed to tolerate and actually coexist rather peacefully with each other. They have a couple different groups of Muslims. They're not always fighting. They disagree about when the moon rises and when the holidays fall, but they're not at each other's throats. Then, you have a small Christian minority which had been rather influential, President Senghor having been part of that. But again, there wasn't a lot of resentment of this small group. Senegal had a very difficult economic situation. The desert was fast encroaching and the livelihood of a lot of people was being wiped out by desertification, so they really were not becoming less poor. It was difficult for the country to maintain its economic standard. Instead, it appeared to be in decline. After independence, the French left. While they left an infrastructure, government offices and lots of buildings, universities, and so on, the country wasn't wealthy enough to really maintain all of that.

Q: Your job was what?

NIELSEN: I was the cultural officer. We had a cultural center and a library and a reasonably important exchanges program, including Fulbright exchanges. We did have cultural programs as well. USIS had gradually gotten out of the business of big cultural events except in Europe. While we didn't bring orchestras and large dance troupes, we did bring small jazz combos and sponsor art exhibits and things along those lines, which were well received and were fun.

Q: Did we have an English program?

NIELSEN: Yes. The thrust there was expanding American studies, which was something of a novelty because their tradition had been emphasizing ties with France. But there was a new generation of teachers who were interested in teaching about the United States, so this was fertile ground for training people who would have some knowledge of America and American studies, which meant history, culture, geography, literature, and language. Language wasn't the only thing.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

NIELSEN: Charles Bray.

Q: And the PAO?

NIELSEN: There were two. I was there for three years. The first PAO was Will Petty and the second PAO was Bob LaGamma.

Q: I'm told the Senegalese are a delightful people.

NIELSEN: Oh, definitely. They are very warm and very friendly and very welcoming. We got to know the Senegalese reasonably well. In spite of the economic distance between many of them and American diplomats, you could feel comfortable. They would invite you to their home and you could, of course, invite them. It's typical of sub-Saharan African societies. They really are very person oriented and people are quickly made to feel welcome.

Q: Did you find that you were in competition with the French cultural side?

NIELSEN: I wouldn't say that, no. I think there was plenty of room for everyone to be active there. It was a very nice experience, having been in Latin America, then to go to Africa, where we had not really been involved in colonizing or imperialism and didn't come in for a lot of criticism for any of those things. We were kind of the new kids on the block and were largely welcomed in our efforts.

Q: Did you get out or did you mostly work around Dakar?

NIELSEN: We didn't have a lot of program reason to travel. Outside of Dakar, there wasn't much in the way of educational institutions. There were many more in Algeria, with more decentralization. Dakar was still very much the centralized capital in the way that Paris always was in France. For tourism, you could certainly travel and we did do some of that, but not much for professional reasons.

Q: Were American TV and movies used there?

NIELSEN: Not so much, because of the language. American movies have traveled everywhere and still do, but the Senegalese looked primarily to France for their cultural stimulation.

Q: Did you get any feel for the rule of Charlie Wick back in Washington?

NIELSEN: Yes. He was very much an activist director. He had the ear of the President and that resulted in resources for USIA, which is all to the good. He did have his pet projects. You could credit him with the beginnings of WorldNet, USIA TV, which personally I never thought was such a great medium, but it was an attempt to be more modern than we had been. That was legitimate. It's just very hard to make good TV serve government purposes. We were not into entertainment TV.

Q: No matter how you slice it, it's a talking head.

NIELSEN: Really, yes. I actually don't mind some talking heads, but the WorldNet programming was never very gripping. I'd rather read what they have to say than watch them say it.

Q: Did you ever have any problems when you were there?

NIELSEN: Not really. You could get sick there, but I didn't. Our son, who was born before we went to Senegal, was an infant there, which worked out well. He did fine there. It's the kind of society which is very friendly to children, so you get to know people.

Q: What was your husband doing?

NIELSEN: His field was teaching English as a foreign language, though he didn't do that much of that, but because he was a trained teacher, he did teach. It was the beginning of the computer era. The early '80s were a time of introduction to word processing and the introduction of computers in our offices. He worked for the embassy and did a lot of computer training.

Q: Did you get any major visits that you got roped into?

NIELSEN: The most interesting thing of that nature was not official visits, since we did not receive any high level visitors that I can recall. President Clinton went to Africa in the 90s, after a long period of no American president having visited sub-Saharan Africa. However, when we were in Dakar, it was an alternate landing site for the space shuttle. It may still be, although we're not sending space shuttles these days. In any case, every time a space shuttle launched, we did have some standby duties. I vividly remember the Challenger blowing up in January of '86 because we were following the launch. But that was about the only claim to fame of Dakar in terms of Washington visibility.

Q: After '86, you're off again. Back to Washington?

NIELSEN: Yes. You have to pay your dues. After 10 years overseas, it was time to come back.

Q: So you were in Washington from '86 to when?

NIELSEN: To '90.

Q: What were you doing?

NIELSEN: I worked in the International Visitor Program for four years. I loved the Program, which still continues under State, as well it should. It's really a wonderful public diplomacy tool, one of the best resources that we have.

Q: We've lived off that for years. I think it's one of our most important diplomatic tools.

NIELSEN: It is. I think it is appreciated. It's not flashy and it's hard to say exactly what effect it has on people because the effect is usually not immediate and it's not usually broadcast. But the program continues. I spent four very happy years, first in the Africa branch and then in the Latin American branch, managing those two programs.

Q: Did you have anything like the international visitors from Hell?

NIELSEN: Yes, there are always a few problems. That's inevitable. There was one African can't recall which country he was from now, maybe Equatorial Guinea, who never quite understood that he was supposed to go to appointments and that he was supposed to have a professional program. He wanted to come and shop and enjoy life with his wife and so on. That could be a problem. Other visitors were quite demanding. We brought a group of Chilean supreme court justices with the idea to give them a sense of an independent judiciary. We probably were not successful in changing their minds very much. Nonetheless, the program was successful in exposing them to other points of view, even if there was not agreement on a lot of issues. These were folks who were also very demanding.

Q: Sometimes you have to have a group like that at the top level so that you can start bringing the younger judges in. This opens the way for the next generation.

NIELSEN: That's right. Often the top dog won't let a subordinate travel unless they've had the same opportunity. You sometimes need to start there. Of course, symbolically, it makes sense to invite those who are influential or, conversely, those who are going to be influential. Either one makes sense.

Q: How did Charlie Wick relate to this program?

NIELSEN: I never met Charlie Wick. He traveled a lot, but he did not travel to the countries where I was, so I guess I don't really have any personal anecdotes.

Q: When you get to 1990, whither? Did you get out again?

NIELSEN: Yes. From Washington, I went to Chile.

Q: You were in Chile from when to when?

NIELSEN: From '90 to '94.

Q: What was the situation in Chile when you got there?

NIELSEN: It was a very propitious era. Pinochet had been surprised to learn that the Chileans really didn't want him to continue in power.

Q: He had had this famous referendum.

NIELSEN: Yes, in 1989. He had been voted out and he had graciously accepted that. By the time I got there, the first civilian in many years was the president, President Alwin. He was a conciliator. He had the task of reestablishing a democratic society and I think he did that very well. The U.S. was pleased with the turn of events and so we paid much more attention to Chile than we might have otherwise, and we did send lots of high level people, beginning with the President. George H. W. Bush was there in 1990, the first American president since Eisenhower in 1956. It was a big deal for the Chileans. They felt now they were back as a member in good standing of the world community and the federation of democratic nations. It was a good time to be there. We worked on a lot of things with them.

Q: You were cultural affairs officer again?

NIELSEN: This time I was the press officer.

Q: What was the Chilean press like? It was now a full democracy?

NIELSEN: Yes, they needed to relearn a little what that meant. Of course, they had been accustomed to self-censorship at the very least. They were able now to be much more free in their reporting. They also at this time were beginning to establish schools of journalism outside the traditional universities. There were only a couple programs and they decided to create some new ones, quite a number of them. We were helping them with that. They had a system of licensing, a law that required journalists to be licensed. We were not of the view that that was a good idea, so we tried to persuade them otherwise. Although journalism as a whole was rather timid, there were and still are plenty of media outlets. The paper of record is El Mercurio, a family-owned enterprise; it was highly respected, and it still continues to play that role. Somewhat surprisingly, radio is still a very important medium, not so much because of the very long commute times that we have, but rather because of the geography of the country. Chile's considerable length is conducive to communication by radio.

Q: How about TV?

NIELSEN: TV was in its infancy. Of course, they had had TV since the '60s, too, but it was still very much under development. I visited there recently. Now, Chilean television is as proficient technically as anywhere. But at that time, in the early 90s, they introduced the first private TV station. That was something new. I guess you could still say television is fairly conservative and fairly timid by our standards, which is not such a bad thing.

Q: Were they looking at us and asking to go to the United States to learn how to redo things or getting people to come from the United States to get their apparatus restarted again?

NIELSEN: Yes. From the academic community, there were already lots of ties and those were exploited in order to jump-start some of their legal institutions, schools of law, and of course their economic policy. Their economic policy had always been quite influenced by the U.S., as a result of the famous "Chicago Boys" (Chileans who had studied in the U.S.), who were responsible for Pinochet's economic policies.

Q: Was there much residue of unhappiness with the United States over the events of '73, when Pinochet took power? We've been accused of being behind it. This is kind of dubious, but at the same time, we weren't opposing the overthrow of Allende.

NIELSEN: It's true, we weren't opposing his overthrow. Quite a bit can now be known factually because the State Department's "Chile project" put the declassified cables from that period online and it is freely available. I haven't read all those cables to know just what the naval attaché in Valparaiso knew and when he knew it, so I can't answer the question of what we did exactly. Of course, the accusation from the left was that the U.S. had a leading role in overthrowing Allende. The left threw around a lot of accusations which were not true, one of which was that Allende was killed, but actually, he killed himself. We didn't have anything to do with it. The Church Commission did its investigation. This was Senator Church. I haven't looked at that in a long time to know what was factual and what was conjecture. Chileans who supported the coup, and there were many, did not object to U.S. actions. The hard-core supporters of Allende continued to be generally anti-U.S. for many reasons.

Q: By 1990-'94, was there much carryover? Did you find people fell into these various camps or was that just past history?

NIELSEN: The history was still alive, maybe not surprisingly so, since 15 years wasn't all that long. However, I did not usually encounter people who had been either tortured or who had relatives who had disappeared.

I would sometimes meet folks in the government who were victims of the Pinochet regime and they did not seem to be rabid ideologues. They seemed to have really gone beyond that. At least in their day to day interactions with us, they were cordial and productive. Obviously the subject hasn't been fully closed. During the time that I was there, the 1976 Letelier murder case was still an important hot topic. We were trying to bring to justice those who had been responsible.

Q: Some were in the United States. There were Americans involved as well as members of Pinochet's secret police.

NIELSEN: That's right. Michael Townley, an American, worked with Pinochet's secret police, the DINA, to carry out this assassination. Then he went into the Witness Protection Program. Meanwhile, we were trying to establish the record and then bring to justice some members of the intelligence service who could be considered responsible. That didn't happen until some years later. I had left Chile by then. But it has happened now.

Q: The Letelier case was the bombing assassination of a former foreign minister and his American assistant. They were both killed on Sheridan Circle in a remote controlled bombing in their car.

NIELSEN: That's right, September 1976. They were riding to work and the bomb exploded and Orlando Letelier was killed along with his assistant, Ronni Moffet. Michael Moffet, her husband, was in the car as well, but he survived. The United States, of course, noted that this was really the first act of terrorism on our soil in many hundreds of years. It was something we took very seriously and we pursued.

Q: It took years and years because there were people in the Pinochet government, very high officials, who were involved.

NIELSEN: Yes, definitely. General Manuel Contreras is credited with being the intellectual author of that crime. He has not admitted it, but he's been charged with that and other crimes. He's under house arrest these days.

Q: Were you there when President Bush came?

NIELSEN: Yes, that was our big moment.

Q: What were you doing?

NIELSEN: As the press attaché, I was at the airport putting down the tape to indicate where the nose of the plane should rest and setting up a flatbed truck for the press to file from, installing phone lines and things like that so that the American press was able to cover this event and the Chilean press likewise. It was a very big symbolic moment because presidential visits were infrequent and in the case of Chile, it had been a good long time since the President came. Just the fact that he came, almost regardless of what he said, was significant. That began a string of other high-level visits as well. And lest we forget, presidential visits, complicated though they were then, were nothing like what they are now in terms of how many people are involved. It was relatively few who were making decisions.

Q: Is there anything else we should cover about Chile?

NIELSEN: To continue the train of thought that President Bush's visit in December, 1990 did mark a return to normalcy, to signal that, we sent our Secretary of Defense, who is now the Vice President, Richard Cheney. Up until that time, we had very little or no military cooperation with Chile because we didn't feel that their human rights record was very positive. So, again, we were able to reestablish our military ties and began cooperation in the military field. That was also quite important.

Q: Didn't they send a ship or two to the Persian Gulf during Desert Storm?

NIELSEN: I can't recall. That war took place while I was there. Colin Powell also visited in his capacity as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. That was an important visit as well because it signaled change in the Chilean military, with the next generation much more mindful of human rights than the previous generation.

Q: We have you leaving there in '94. Let's pick this up the next time. Where did you go?

NIELSEN: I came back to Washington for language training and then on to Sweden.

Q: Today is February 10, 2005. In '94, you're taking Swedish.

NIELSEN: Yes. One of those lovely one-country languages.

Q: I can't remember, how Swedish is Nielsen? Did you have a tie?

NIELSEN: N-I-E-L-S-O-N would be the Swedish spelling of Nielsen. The Danish spelling is N-I-E-L-S-E-N, which is my last name. It's a name I married into, so I can't claim any personal affiliation, but certainly all the folks in Scandinavia are descended from the same stock, and at least my husband can trace his roots to Norway and Denmark.

Q: You were in Sweden from when to when?

NIELSEN: From '94 to '98.

Q: What was your job?

NIELSEN: I was the public affairs officer.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you went there?

NIELSEN: Thomas Siebert.

Q: What's his background?

NIELSEN: He was a classmate of Bill Clinton at Georgetown and was a lawyer and businessperson who worked in the area of telecommunications. His specialty was telecommunications law. He was an early supporter of Bill Clinton and a friend personally from school, so that was how he ended up in Sweden.

Q: What did he bring to the job?

NIELSEN: He had a very keen sense of politics, which is not unexpected, but I thought he did a good job of explaining the Clinton presidency. Sweden was the kind of place where you would often be asked to do public speaking. I worked with him quite a bit on many of his speeches. Some of them were focused on economics and business. That was one of our policy interests, to explain how the American economic system was constructed and functioned. We were at that moment very proud of our entrepreneurial achievements, our stock market achievements, our innovation in technology and information technology. The Swedes were interested in that, and the Ambassador was a good spokesman on those things. Also, what impressed me a lot was how he would encapsulate American politics. He knew a lot about partisan politics, but also what effect the charisma of someone like Bill Clinton or Ronald Reagan had and how you accounted for that. He was very effective.

Q: When you arrived there in '94, what was the status of Swedish-American relations?

NIELSEN: Relations were good. Eastern Europe had just had its seismic shift and the countries of Eastern Europe were interested in joining western institutions; Sweden was a good bridge for many of them both to see what a nominally non-aligned country looked like in terms of its defense alliances or non-alliances, as well as its economic system. We were able to work very collegially with the Swedes in helping the newly independent states - specifically the Baltic states because they were the closest neighbors - to become familiar with western-style democracy, with market-based systems, and with crafting a foreign policy that would contribute to stability in Europe. The Swedes were our partners in that.

Q: How about Sweden and Poland? Was there much affinity there at that time?

NIELSEN: I can't think of many direct ties. I met a number of Poles who had come to Sweden as a consequence of the rise of the Nazis. I'm thinking of one Polish gentleman who was the director of the Stockholm Institute for Peace Research. He had a very interesting Holocaust story. There were some others like that that I recall, but I don't know how large the community of Poles living in Sweden was.

Q: Even though they're on the Baltic, you think of the Poles as part of the European-German connection.

NIELSEN: That's right. When I think of the Baltic states, I think primarily of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Poland is a Baltic state but kind of in a different category.

Q: Was there much affinity between the Swedes and the Finns?

NIELSEN: Sure. There were fine fraternal feelings between Sweden and all of its Scandinavian neighbors. Centuries ago, there were conflicts and struggles, but at this point in time, they had resolved those. They're all members of the EU except for Norway. So, their natural cultural and linguistic ties are only strengthened by the fact that there's so much commerce between them and the citizens move freely from one country to another. The languages are extremely similar, with the exception of Finnish, of course, which is off there on its own, languagewise. There is a Scandinavian bloc often in the EU where those countries see eye to eye on a lot of issues that tend to differentiate them from their southern neighbors.

Q: How did you find the Swedish media? This was your main concern, wasn't it? I'm thinking of radio, but particularly the press and TV.

NIELSEN: They were by and large very professional, well-trained. They were sophisticated, or at least most of them were, and not as inclined to just make knee-jerk criticisms of the United States. I think we worked very amicably with them and had a good dialogue. It wasn't an acrimonious relationship at all.

Q: There had been a time, particularly in the '60s and '70s where the Swedes, particularly the left-wing and the intelligencia, were really having a wonderful time dumping on the U.S. and looking at the warts and nothing else. Had that gone?

NIELSEN: That generation has by and large disappeared. Yes, there is a communist party still in Sweden and they have their media organs and they will never be friends of the United States. They are not going to say anything good about us. But the mainstream media, first, they were looking largely to local issues like any media would do, and then to European issues and, yes, international issues for sure. But at that time, we were not engaged in any war, and there really wasn't an immediate cause for strident concern. The Swedish media is very different than what it was in the '60s, when there were many activists who were vociferous against the war in Vietnam. Many Americans did end up in Sweden, so there was a reason for them to pay attention. Sure, that was the climate of that time. That has changed.

Q: How about the Americans who went there? Have they all gone back? Was there an American dissident community?

NIELSEN: No, I thought there should be and I was on the watch for it, but I can't say that I really encountered it. Every now and again, I'd meet someone who, yes, had been there since the '60s, but they were not necessarily dissidents. There were also a number of Americans who traveled to Sweden and ended up staying. Maybe they married a Swede. But it wasn't that they were dissidents. It was just an inviting place to go and if they liked it, they stayed. The vocal critics, I'm sure there were still some who remained there, but they weren't making their presence felt.

Q: Did you feel that you had to protect your ambassador from hostility or warn him or was this a fairly open media market?

NIELSEN: We were viewed very amicably. The Swedes were friendly and the media likewise were not hostile. The ambassador didn't have any problems in that sense. We can contrast it with Greece, which was diametrically opposed. Sweden was a lovely place to be an ambassador because you generally didn't encounter the hostile press that you would find here, for example.

Q: The Clinton administration had its problems both personal, with the Lewinsky case, but also the problems with Congress which since the election of '92 was not only hostile but quite hostile to the administration. Did that get played out in the Swedish press?

NIELSEN: We talked a lot about the lack of civility in our political discourse. I think it is still remarkable, was then and is still quite a remarkable characteristic. Things have not gotten markedly better, but those were the days of the Contract with America and Newt Gingrich and his plans, most of which didn't happen. I think there is no good explanation for why our politicians behave the way they do. It's rather an embarrassment.

Q: It was a very bad period. Were you there during the impeachment of the President?

NIELSEN: No, by then, I was here studying Greek.

Q: Was Russia much of a concern in Sweden?

NIELSEN: Russia has always been a concern in Sweden. Even then, yes, trying to know what was going to happen in Russia was of great interest to them, and there was certainly a large degree of mistrust of the Russians based on their past history. There was great interest in dialogue and we tried to foment at the time quite useful and forward looking foreign policy seminars that brought the Eastern European countries together with the Russian foreign minister to talk about the future of that region. It was a new beginning. Now, these seem like rather tame discussions because all of those countries are now members of Partnership for Peace and some of them have gone on to become NATO members. It was really a new concept for both Americans and for those countries as well, to imagine the close military alliance that now exists.

Q: The Swedes had been very much involved with African countries, particularly promoting their form of socialism. It's turned out to be kind of a disaster, Tanzania and other places. Was there a great interest in Africa at that time? Did we get involved with the Swedes in this?

NIELSEN: I can't say that the Swedes had lost interest in Africa, but it wasn't one of our goals at the embassy.

Q: They were doing their thing.

NIELSEN: Right. I'm at a loss to recall what our policy in Africa was. Up until that time, we were not heavily engaged. President Clinton did make an important visit to several countries in Africa. It was the first that he had done. This was in '96 or '97. It was kind of a catch-up initiative, since we had largely neglected much of Africa. The Swedes on their own have a wonderful tradition of being very generous in terms of development assistance and medical assistance and they would try to shame us into being more generous ourselves, but it wasn't a big issue, at least in my office.

Q: How well did you feel the Swedes were absorbing immigrants coming from other countries, particularly Eastern Europe?

NIELSEN: They were very concerned about immigration. The war in Bosnia created a lot of refugees and prospective immigrants. Many of them came to Sweden under its enlightened refugee policies. The Swedes felt that maybe they ought to actively try to persuade them to return home when conditions were right. The large number of immigrants was perceived to be tipping the balance in their society. There were other waves of immigration well before that the Turkish immigration in the '70s, for example. Every day, you would have articles in the press that were immigrant stories, how well they were integrating or not integrating. The Swedes did a lot of soul searching on that issue. Their philosophy was to be welcoming on the one hand. On the other hand, they felt that they were a small society. They were homogenous and if too many outsiders were allowed to remain, then their society would no longer be homogenous and they wondered how that would play out in terms of the social contract that they had enjoyed with their citizens. They were afraid on that level. They provided tremendous benefits to people who were there legally. They taught them Swedish for one thing. Kids were given individual tutoring and brought up to speed in Swedish in record time. They were subsidized economically so that they had a very decent standard of living quite early on. So they did a lot, but they did feel the strains of the cost of that.

Q: Speaking of that, was there a feeling in the embassy about Sweden's very substantial and very nice, but very expensive, social program. I would think this would cut down on entrepreneurship and initiative and so on. How did we feel about that?

NIELSEN: There were many Swedish economists who pointed out that there were some real problems with their system that was so very generous. One of them often cited the example that a Swedish doctor would not be making appreciably more than a Swedish housepainter and so the doctor had no incentive to hire the painter for his house. He would logically decide to paint the house himself because he would have the time and it would cost him relatively too much to hire this painter. If he did a couple gallbladder operations, he wasn't going to come out ahead economically. So that created some tensions. The education minister was very adamant that there should not be anything that could smack of elitism in the schools. His thinking was that you wouldn't want to encourage the high achievers to propel themselves too quickly or too far because that would make the middle, the average, feel somehow less good about themselves, so you really wanted everybody to be average. The system tried to help those who needed help to bring them up to that average standard, but there shouldn't be any effort to really encourage outstanding achievement. In his opinion, those who were going to be outstanding achievers would do that on their own anyway. You didn't have to encourage them, so emphasis should be placed on making things as equal as possible. They did a good job of making things as equal as possible, with the downside that entrepreneurs sometimes felt they should make their company headquarters at least someplace else, because they would not be taxed as much and they would have greater flexibility in hiring and firing and the labor laws might be more conducive to the growth of their company. A lot of them did make that decision.

Q: Did you find running a USIS operation difficult under their labor laws?

NIELSEN: My short answer is "no." We're a government organization and we had very careful safeguards to protect the rights of workers. We don't operate like the private sector. Therefore, if, for example, you felt you needed to terminate an underperformer, I would not say that in our government structure that's an easy thing to do. You have to do quite a bit of due diligence, counseling, documentation. The process is going to take a fair amount of time. You have to commit yourself early if you want to get it done. Therefore, we could follow that procedure and not be doing anything unethical. I don't know if the Swedes would have done it the same way, but at least we weren't acting in an extreme fashion. I can't think of any instance where we had problems with Swedish labor law because of what we were trying to do. I think we obeyed Swedish labor law to the extent we were obliged to do so and were fair in the way we structured our personnel system.

Q: I'm taking as an assumption that we didn't have to push English teaching because the Swedes already got that through the school system.

NIELSEN: That's basically true. The Swedes speak very good English and they do teach themselves English. We would make a contribution in the higher graduate level American studies area, but we didn't need to promote English teaching in the same way that you would in most other countries. We did have a program still, but it was small and not that important.

Q: What about Swedes going to the United States to study? Was there a solid pattern of this?

NIELSEN: Sure. The Fulbright Program is one way to go to the U.S. to study that the Swedes took great advantage of, because they were very well qualified and could get, in addition to a small Fulbright grant, help from the U.S. schools. There were reasonable numbers who took that route. On the other hand, Swedish universities were virtually free to them, so you wouldn't see people going at the undergraduate level. The system is quite different, so if you grew up in the Swedish secondary school, not that many of them would be thinking of an American university until graduate studies.

Q: With graduate school, was there a brain drain because of the relatively rigid Swedish system? When you have that much control, I would think that the free spirits would want to get the hell out.

NIELSEN: Yes, I'll bet that's a reasonable characterization, that those who don't fit in would look elsewhere. Where they were looking at the time I was there were the many options proliferating thanks to the European Union. A great many exchange programs were sponsored within the European Union. I think that was the first choice for most of them because it was affordable, closer, they might not need to know a language other than English either because there are sectors of the German universities that teach in English or the French universities taking EU students and teaching in English. So that wasn't a big problem for them. Then later on, they could be hoping for a career in Europe and that was a big issue given the low rate of job creation in Sweden itself. Many of the university graduates realized they did need to go somewhere else and Europe was the first thought for most of them.

Q: How did the war in Bosnia play out in Sweden?

NIELSEN: It was front page news for years while we were there. The Swedes had some peacekeepers or some military contribution in Tuzla (Hungary)..

Q: It was a very large contingent of many countries there.

NIELSEN: There were contributions from most everywhere there. The Swedish presence was small, but they were doing their part, they thought. The refugee issue was big. The human rights issue concerned them quite a bit. The establishment of viable democracy in Bosnia-Herzegovina was of great interest to them. They have some very skilled diplomats who were mediating. Karl Bildt, the former Swedish prime minister, was one of the mediators. He wasn't the last, so obviously the job was very difficult. Swedes were quite engaged in Bosnia.

Q: Was there a problem explaining why we didn't go in at first or was this applauded? At first they said, "This is a European problem and we can take care of this." The result was horrible.

NIELSEN: That's right. I think the Swedes went along with the European line publicly. I don't know what they would say privately. Probably, they would admit it was a good thing when the U.S. took action. In the run-up to the Dayton Accords, Ambassador Holbrooke had quite a bit of interaction with the Swedish mediator, Karl Bildt, and I think they worked closely together to resolve this conflict. You certainly get that impression from Holbrooke's book, *To End a War*.

Q: Were you there during the assassination of Olaf Palme?

NIELSEN: No, he was assassinated in 1976, a long time ago. But the issue had not yet been laid to rest even at the time I was there. Of course, it had been heavily investigated at the time and for many years since. Occasionally, there would be new developments. There was someone taken into custody while I was there. His name was Christer Pettersson. I think they have reasonably well concluded that he is the guilty party. He did it on his own. It was not a political murder. He was a lifelong criminal. I forget what his reasoning was on that day. He was a drug addict, but whether he was under the influence at that moment I don't know. It reminds you of the recent attack on the Swedish foreign minister, who was killed while shopping at a department store. That individual also was not politically motivated. He was found to be insane as well. The Olaf Palme murder was a wakeup call for the Swedes that not everyone was going to be as civilized as they hoped in their country. As we saw from the Anna Lind murder, the level of violence is very low in Sweden, but it does happen and it is always shocking to the Swedes when something like that happens. But, Swedish government officials do not go around with bodyguards. Normally, they don't need them.

Q: How did you find social life there?

NIELSEN: Very welcoming. We were there with our two sons and they played a lot of sports with the Swedes.

Q: How old were your sons at the time you arrived?

NIELSEN: Seven and 11. They were able to enjoy things Swedish. We were homeschooling them while they were there, so they didn't per se have a school class that they were part of, but they took part in scouts and sports with Swedish kids. It's a very child friendly or family-friendly country. The Swedes are very sportsminded. They're very fitness oriented. You easily get sucked into being active, which is good.

Q: During the four years you were there, were there any crisis points?

NIELSEN: On the foreign relations side, probably not. The important developments were in technology. We really saw the IT revolution take hold and it meant a significant change in how we were doing business. The Swedes were in the forefront of computer use, Internet use and development. Our embassy had one of the first home pages, web pages, and that was an important development. We also saw what was from my point of view a significant event, which was the decision to dismantle USIA. In the run-up to that, partial dismantlement took place. There were major personnel and budget cuts; our operation diminished in a big way, never to be replaced. We went out of the library business and the English teaching business and we cut staff dramatically. That was the run-up to the merger. Some of those functions that USIA used to do remain but maybe in a somewhat atrophied capacity.

Q: Looking at it in retrospect, did you feel this was a needed development or did it really hurt our operations?

NIELSEN: I think it makes sense to have everything under one roof. The public diplomacy function can well be part of the State Department. If administratively you want to do that, I don't have a philosophical objection. But in the wake of the merger, many report that it's too easy for public diplomacy to be considered a stepchild and not to be viewed as significantly as it was when public diplomacy was the essence of an entire agency. So, that has an impact on resources and on how members of the Department utilize the public diplomacy resources that they have. Colin Powell was a great supporter of public diplomacy, so his leadership was a positive thing. But you still see in the Department, particularly among the older generation of folks, not as much understanding of what the USIS functions are and should be and could be and that has led to an abiding denigration of its role.

If you were to do the merger correctly, it could be a reasonable thing bureaucratically, but I'm not sure that's what happened. There were efforts to preserve some of the best practices of USIA. I'm not sure that too many that were preserved, though there was an effort to do that. Then, you would logically want to make sure that those things that USIA did especially well, like exchanges and personal diplomacy, were preserved and presumably enhanced because their importance was recognized and their funding ensured. That's a difficult thing to do when we have so many more bureaus competing for resources, even in an era of expanding resources.

Q: You left Sweden in 1998. Then what?

NIELSEN: I came back to Washington and learned Greek.

Q: Was that a year's program, 10 months?

NIELSEN: Ten months.

Q: So we're talking about '99. You went to Greece for how long?

NIELSEN: For two years.

Q: So to 2001. I assume you went to Athens.

NIELSEN: Right.

Q: As public affairs officer?

NIELSEN: I was cultural affairs officer.

Q: This was a difficult time with the Greeks.

NIELSEN: Yes. Probably most eras have been difficult with the Greeks, but this was no exception. We were engaged in the former Yugoslavia, bombing in Kosovo, and this was not a popular policy in Greece. The government was not much in favor of it either, but in particular the press were quite anti. So the usual level of anti-American demonstrations was ratcheted up to a pretty significant level.

Q: Who was your ambassador?

NIELSEN: Nicholas Burns.

Q: So he was one of our top diplomats.

NIELSEN: That's right.

Q: How did he work with the public diplomacy side of things?

NIELSEN: He was very interested in public diplomacy. Of course, as someone who had been press spokesman, he knew a lot about it and he knew how he wanted to conduct his public diplomacy, so he set the tone.

Q: As cultural affairs officer, what sort of things were you doing in Greece?

NIELSEN: We have an ongoing annual American studies seminar which is a very useful event because the universities, though they're longstanding, don't really teach, at least not as a separate entity, U.S. literature, history or political science, so there's a gap there. I think the two week- long American studies course that is offered is an important contribution to that. We also do the typical seminars on other issues. We did one, for example, on biotechnology at the time that Europe was voicing great skepticism about biotech foods. Of course, our position is that they're safe and we would like to export them, so there was a need to try to educate the public to the science involved in this field.

In the area of American politics, we had elections coming up. I was there at the time of the 2000 elections, so we had a number of programs that were designed to help the Greek media and Greeks know what the issues were in the U.S. at that time.

There is also a small but significant number of American universities in Greece. This is kind of a phenomenon because the Greek constitution does not allow private universities. One of our goals was to convince the Greeks that maybe there could be a way to expand their public university system to embrace these private universities, which happen to be American universities. We felt that they offered an American-style education which was particularly strong in business and in technology, areas where traditionally the Greek universities were not so interested. That was another main focus of our activity.

We did some cultural events. Of course, Greece is quite prominent in theater and in the arts, so we could take advantage of that.

Q: How did you find the Greek government response to trying to move American style education in at some level, business training or this sort of thing? Any luck while you were there?

NIELSEN: I can't say that we cracked this very knotty issue of allowing private education in Greece. The Greek constitution expressly forbids it. Of course, there is a way to amend the constitution, but that was difficult and while in practice these universities were thriving because the Greeks recognized the value of attending them and they sent their sons and daughters, the formal recognition is something that has not yet been achieved. I left in 2001. It's still a pending issue. It was an issue of concern well before I got there. I think it's going to go on.

Q: I was there in the early 1970s with the colonels. My wife was involved with a small private international school. It survived, but I think it was illegal. Like so many of those things, they just sort of slipped under the radar.

NIELSEN: What was the name of it?

Q: I think it was the Hellenic International School or something. It's merged into something else which merged into something else.

NIELSEN: And it was providing post-secondary education?

Q: It was providing high school education for basically foreign students. Some Greek-Americans sent their kids there, too.

NIELSEN: It was English medium?

Q: Yes.

NIELSEN: And patterned after a U.S.-style education. Of course, there is an American school there.

Q: Yes. This is a Department of Defense school.

NIELSEN: Initially it would have been. When you were there, the bases were still operating.

Q: The bases were still operating, but the school was separate and the kids were being sent there.

NIELSEN: Right, and funding probably was heavily coming from DOD. With the closing of the bases, the school remained and still remains, though it was suffering. There were many fewer American kids to go there. But it is one of the schools that the embassy sent its kids to.

Q: How bad was the anti-American hostility while you were there?

NIELSEN: We used to say that there are no more than 10% of Greeks who are really anti-American. That 10% can make a lot of noise. They can stir up demonstrations. They can write lots of editorials and so on. But you would not really feel that you were in a hostile environment. As an American diplomat, we found that by and large it was reasonably pleasant to deal with the Greeks. There may be obstacles, but they weren't anti-American obstacles. They were just procedural obstacles where the system was very difficult to get things done. The ministries were very inefficient and largely ineffectual, but that wasn't necessarily a reflection of anti-Americanism.

Q: It was a reflection of Greece.

NIELSEN: That's right. Greek reality, with a long tradition of a bureaucracy that just really doesn't move. The Greeks are aware of that, of course.

Q: Did you run afoul of the Greek Orthodox Church at all in the cultural affairs field?

NIELSEN: Yes, the Greek Orthodox Church took a vocal stance in favor of the brother Serbs, which was not our view of the war in Serbia. They were definitely partisan. One would like to think that the church was a force for peace and reconciliation. I'm not sure I would say that about the Greek Orthodox Church. They were pretty obscurantist.

Q: The Serb Orthodox Church is also. I served a long time both in Greece and in Yugoslavia. The Orthodox churches there were at the heart of the nationalism and the nastiness that turned into close to genocide.

NIELSEN: That's right. Surprisingly, and it should be surprising, if you have a faith-based organization, they shouldn't be into genocide despite the fact that they are very nationalistic. Indeed, the Greek Orthodox Church was supremely nationalistic. But they should see a contradiction between supporting genocide and professing Christianity. The Greek Church was clearly very nationalistic and not an easy interlocutor in any event.

Q: Did it impact on any of your cultural events?

NIELSEN: Not very directly, I don't believe. The Greeks, and certainly the ones we were working with, while they were culturally Orthodox, they were not practicing their religion very much. When the arch-patriarch would speak, he would command an audience, but, on a daily basis, the Greeks were not hanging on the word of the church. They were going about their secular business pretty much. Was that the case when you were there as well?

Q: When I was there, the Greek bishops forbade bathing of women and men in the same lake or something like that, and they were against a magician's show. But nobody paid much attention to it.

NIELSEN: And of course, bathing in a lake doesn't happen very much. You went out to the sea. I guess you could always segregate the beaches.

Q: This was up north near Larissa, where there was a lake or something.

NIELSEN: Yes, well, they have evolved some.

Q: On the cultural side, did you get involved in trying to explain the election of 2002, which dragged on and on because of the Florida vote and so on?

NIELSEN: Oh, yes, that was a topic. We ended up not having the traditional election night program. That turned out to be a good thing because election night just went on for a month. But we did make a valiant effort to make people aware of what was happening and to try to explain that it really wasn't a crisis, even though it was being portrayed as a crisis worldwide. People in America were going about their lives pretty much as they had been before. Yes, they did want to get it settled, but at least it really didn't provoke a constitutional crisis or a crisis in fact. It makes you examine our system more closely. Trying to justify the Electoral College is not very easy. It doesn't make a lot of sense actually, except as a historical artifact, but it doesn't seem as though it's going to be changing any time soon.

Q: Did the Greek-American community play any role in what you were doing?

NIELSEN: They were a big presence. They were very well organized, very enthusiastic. They would send their delegations frequently to visit and the ambassador was very welcoming to them and definitely felt that we should partner with the Greek-Americans whenever possible. We did do that. They are certainly a force. The Greek Diaspora is as large as the population of Greece.

Q: Did you get involved in the name of Macedonia? Or was this something you tried to avoid?

NIELSEN: The worst of that had already taken place by the time I got there. But, yes, we in our Washington files, in our daily bulletins and so on, didn't always use the full name of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia [FYROM]. Technically, that was the correct name, but occasionally you would see official pronouncements from Colin Powell... I can recall sending someone something under my signature, a monthly bulletin or something, and getting a letter back from someone who said, "Oh, since when has the United States gone on record as supporting Macedonia in its claim to use our name?" It was because we had sent something that, instead of referring to FYROM used "The Republic of Macedonia" most probably. I think the Greeks were becoming more culturally aware of their neighbor to the north. They're just going to have to accept that there's going to be a country by the name of Macedonia. The rest of the world really didn't much care.

Q: Yes.

In 2001, what happened?

NIELSEN: I decided to retire. It felt like a good thing to do at the time. After 25 years, our older son was going off to college and the younger one was starting high school, so it seemed that that was the appropriate juncture to come back to the U.S., allow my husband to resume his career rather, not so much to resume, but carve out a career, and then I would be secondary and tend to other interesting things. So that's what I decided to do. I wasn't actually obliged to retire at that time, but I decided to do it, so we came back to Virginia. I have now returned to work part-time at State, but I'm a retiree.

Q: During the time you were in Sweden and Greece, what was your husband up to?

NIELSEN: In Sweden, he was doing the supervising of the homeschooling for our sons. Then in Greece, did some consulting in the computer field. He did considerable self-study in computer programming with the idea that when we returned here, he would get a job in the computer/high-tech field.

Q: When they came back, how did your kids adjust to American schooling?

NIELSEN: Quite well, actually. They didn't seem to find things too surprising. Our older son was happy with the freedom you find on college campuses.

Q: Where did he go to school?

NIELSEN: He went to Virginia Tech. Our younger son started high school at Yorktown High School in Arlington. He likes the school. It's his first "big school" experience, but he's really adjusted very nicely. Yes, I can't complain.

Q: Great, Barbara, I'll think we'll stop at this point.

NIELSEN: Well, I thank you. You're a good host.

Q: It's been fun.

NIELSEN: You have to keep yourself apprized of world events everywhere, I guess.

Q: Well, each interview adds to my knowledge of what was happening.

End of interview