

Interview with Herbert A. Fierst

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

HERBERT A. FIERST

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

Initial interview date: July 16, 1996

Copyright 1998 ADST

Q: First, I wonder if you could tell me when and where you were born and something about your parents.

FIERST: Well, believe it or not, I was born the day that World War I, not World War II, started - July 29, 1914. I was born in New York City. My father was an immigrant who came to this country at the age of 16, in the year 1900, from what is now known as Lithuania, then part of Russia. He was a youngster of 16, an ardent Jew who was about to be drafted into the Czarist Army and managed to escape in a kind of spectacular way, and came penniless to the United States and then founded a boys' clothing manufacturing company. My mother was born in Montreal, and was the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi. They were married in 1913, the year before I was born.

Q: In a way, this is the classical story, isn't it? Did you get much feeling from your father about Russia and the situation there, particularly for the Jewish community? Did he talk much about it?

FIERST: Not when I was a youngster, but when I got interested later on it was a subject that fascinated me and really influenced me in a number of directions.

Library of Congress

Q: How would you say it influenced you?

FIERST: Well, he was, long before he came to the States, at the age of 13, an early Zionist - he ran a library of Zionist literature before he emigrated. He later became treasurer of the Zionist Organization of America and we had a succession of impressive visitors to our house. We used to live in Mount Vernon, Westchester County, New York, and there was an active Jewish community there. And then he realized his great ambition, which turned out to be mine, too - bringing me, together with the rest of the family to Jerusalem to celebrate my Bar Mitzvah at the age of 13. That was the year that Lindbergh flew the Atlantic. There was no commercial aviation - it took us two weeks to get there by ship and rail and car. I was the first American boy to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah in Jerusalem. So I say that this was an early exposure in a very exciting, emotional way, to Zionism.

I just might interpolate now that when I was about that age I was in an oratorical contest at my synagogue. I won it with a very emotional peroration - that someday, I said this roughly in about 1927, Palestine would be a haven of refuge for hundreds of thousands of oppressed Jews around the world. My father afterwards took me aside and said that he was very proud of me, but I should learn not to exaggerate - not hundreds of thousands he cautioned! So that's the atmosphere that I was raised in as a youngster.

Q: Now tell us about your schooling - your education.

FIERST: I went to a conventional grade school in Mount Vernon, and ended up that educational system at public high school. It was then called Mount Vernon High School, and later became A.B. Davis High School. Then I went to Harvard College, entered in 1931 and graduated in 1935. That really ties back to the question you asked me about my father. To him, this was a dream come true, that his son should be attending Harvard College. When he came to visit me there, along with my mother, he took so seriously the kind of inscriptions that were on the arches of the buildings we passed through every day

Library of Congress

and really didn't notice - such as "Enter and Grow in Wisdom," or something like that. He was very much of an idealist. I have to say that really influenced me.

I look back with a great deal of affection at my four years at Harvard. I had a scholarship, but also a job of 15 to 18 hours a week, the whole four years that I was there. Most of the time, two of the four years, I did work that did not relate to my subsequent career, as it turned out. I was in the Harvard College Astronomical Observatory. One year I was in the Boston State House on some research project related to government.

I had a great experience during my senior year that affected my attitude toward foreign affairs, really for the rest of my life. We had to do a thesis in the honors program. I was majoring, or concentrating as they called it then, in Government. In 1934 there had been a general strike on the San Francisco waterfront, led by Harry Bridges, an Australian longshoreman, a crypto communist, a very dynamic fellow. Somehow or other, I got interested in the subject of the general strike as a method of averting war. It became the subject of my thesis. The socialist movements around the world had developed the notion that the workers were cannon fodder of the capitalists and if war was declared or initiated, all they had to do was strike and they could not be subjected to the brutal treatment of WWI, when they were killed by the hundreds of thousands and millions. I started looking into the subject, as I recall, from an objective and neutral point of view. However, as I analyzed it in the context of world affairs at the time, I reached the conclusion that it was a terrible idea because the only areas in which a general strike could be effective were in the democracies. The threats to world peace came from fascist, Nazi fascist, countries and from the Soviet Union, which would not allow a general strike to be organized.

This now, in retrospect, seems such an obvious conclusion, but at the time it was not. There were so many well meaning liberals and radicals who thought that the thing to do was to curtail world armaments and that would solve a lot of the problems. Unfortunately, they influenced primarily the democracies, not the threats to peace. The Government

Library of Congress

Department thought very well of my thesis and my work, and I graduated summa cum laude.

More important than that, a few weeks before graduation I was awarded a Sheldon Traveling Fellowship, which provided the munificent sum, in those days, of \$1500 for a year's travel abroad. The only conditions attached to it were not to get married during that year and not to stay in any one place and study, but to broaden yourself by traveling. A wonderful, wonderful fellowship! I had already been admitted to Yale Law School at that point, and was intending to go to law school and become a lawyer. So I changed my plans altogether and spent a fascinating year abroad traveling in 15 countries.

Q: This was what year?

FIERST: This was from July, 1935 to June 1936.

Q: Oh, boy. That was a really...things were still open, but...

FIERST: Yes, I had some hair raising experiences, say, in Nazi Germany, which I won't go into here. This is a long-winded answer to your question about college.

Q: One of the things I'd like to get - coming from your background - liberal, idealistic, New York Jewish, immigrant, and then going to Harvard - what was your impression, during these times, of the Soviet Union, that you were getting from the family, neighbors, and then at Harvard? Were there differences?

FIERST: I don't remember the neighbors. There were some pro-Soviet people that were idealistic and thought that the USSR was going to change the world for the better. I have to say, while I think of it, I had a very lucky experience in the Soviet Union on this trip. Through a series of coincidences and introductions, I had a letter of introduction from Otto Tolischus, who was the New York Times correspondent in Berlin, to Walter Duranty, the New York Times correspondent in Moscow, who was regarded at the time as a great

Library of Congress

reporter. Later he wrote a famous book, *I Write as I Please*. The reason it was lucky for me was lucky that when I went to Moscow and I went to his office, he was either out of the city or out of the country. His secretary introduced me to somebody else. I'm afraid that if I had met Duranty I would have fallen under his influence. In retrospect, from what I know, he did some terrible pro-Soviet things, concealing the extent of the famine among the peasants and so on. Whether this was deliberate or not I don't know, but as I look back over the accidents of my life and the coincidences, a number of times I've said to myself - I wonder if I would have come out of the Soviet Union with a different, pro-Soviet view if I had been under the influence of Walter Duranty.

Q: It was very easy - it is difficult today to go back and reconstruct, I think, for those who haven't experienced it. From what I gathered, a lot of Americans went to the Soviet Union to visit, and they were looking for good. This was supposed to be the "new man", the "new world", and all that. What was your impression of the Soviet Union? What did you come away with?

FIERST: Mind you, I was there, as it turned out, during the initial period of the purges, which I didn't know about at the time. Instead of meeting Walter Duranty, I had met through his secretary, a young man named John Hazard, who was there on a fellowship to study Soviet jurisprudence - the first American to do that. He took me under his wing, a little bit. He took me to see a Soviet municipal court in action. I had no inkling at the time, and I doubt that he did too, that the purge trials were beginning. They had not been publicized. I had the impression, which was reflected in letters that I wrote after I got out, or in a diary, that American visitors, and world visitors were taken in by what they saw through the eyes of an inexperienced visitor, because they were gushing all over when they came looking for uplifting things. I use a very simple example - it comes back to me now - of when I was a youngster of 21 at the time. It was January of 1936, the middle of winter that I was in Moscow, and I was probably the only American tourist in the whole country. As a result of this, though, (I was traveling third class, and was supposed to go with tourists in a bus for sightseeing), I was taken around in a limousine by myself with

Library of Congress

an Intourist guide and I remember she took me to a candy factory. I had never visited a candy factory in the United States. [Most American tourists didn't visit candy factories or any other factories, and they get impressed by machinery if they visit factories abroad.] But I was appalled by the way that these women, whose noses were dripping with colds, were wiping them off with their hands without having gloves, then handling the chocolates. It had a superficial impression of efficiency, but was really very primitive and even health threatening.

I did have one fascinating experience with a young Soviet engineer, who was a relative of somebody from my hometown. He was in his late 20's, as I remember. He had been an engineer on the Dneeprestoy Dam which a lot of American engineers had worked on. He had picked up real vernacular, fluent English. He came to my hotel room where we talked and we did a little walking together for seven solid hours, he was just spewing forth some of the conditions that he had met in the USSR. He wasn't bitterly complaining, but very realistic and not very complimentary. So I did not emerge as a starry eyed apologist for the Soviet Union. I might have been tempted, as I mentioned before, if I had come under the influence of Walter Duranty.

Q: While we're doing this, could we touch the other base, what did you cull out - here you were, of Jewish stock, coming into Nazi Germany just when it was really cranking up towards its hate. How did it strike you?

FIERST: I had a very unusual experience - it almost embarrasses me in retrospect to tell you how it started. I was in Brussels, attending the World's Fair. I had no intention of going to Nazi Germany, although I had been invited there by the father of a then 12 year old boy my parents had taken into our house. He was on the first boatload of Jewish refugee children coming to the United States in 1934. But, well, we are about to have the Olympics here - this was half a year before the famous 1936 Berlin Olympics - the Nazis were supposed to be on their somewhat better behavior. There was much talk of a boycott of Nazi Germany which I was prepared to observe. I can laugh now about why I changed

Library of Congress

my mind, but I didn't at the time. In visiting the Brussels World's Fair, somehow or other I got duped by three confidence men and they deprived me of practically all the money I had at the time. Another increment of my Fellowship money was due in a couple of months. So I decided that I would take advantage of the invitation that had been extended to me. I wouldn't really be violating the boycott, since I didn't have any money left (I had a little), and I would be staying in Berlin with this Jewish family. So that's what I did.

I can't resist telling you about the fantastic opportunity I had that, unfortunately, I was not able to take advantage of, to assassinate Hitler. I wouldn't be here, but it also would have changed the course of history!

I am a great believer at this stage of my life in serendipity. Things happen as you go along, and sometimes you can influence the course of events and sometimes you can't. In this particular case, after I had been in Berlin, living with this family for a little while, I did have the sense of the world closing in on the Jews but not of anything really dramatic. I wrote to Ferdinand Kuhn, who was then the New York Times correspondent in London. I had a letter of introduction to him from our mutual high school history teacher, which I had not used as yet. I said, "I am going to see you when I came to London, but would you please introduce me to the New York Times correspondent in Berlin." So, by return mail he sent me a letter of introduction to Otto Tolischus, whose articles I had read avidly in the Times and I thought he was a terrific reporter.

When I went to see him and explained to him my circumstances - how do I go about finding out what's really happening here - he took me in hand and gave me a good many practical suggestions, which I followed. I should explain, for the benefit of those who may be reading this, that in those days I had quite a bit of hair and it was quite blonde. I have a German sounding name. So, while I made no effort to conceal or restrict my activities because I was Jewish, I also didn't go about mentioning it one way or another. I met quite a few Nazis, many of whom looked very non-Aryan but they assumed that I was of "Aryan" extraction. Anyway, I'll just tell you this one incident to give you the flavor of how exciting

Library of Congress

this trip was. He said to me (Otto Tolischus) "Do you have a document or certificate from Harvard that has a seal on it?" And I said "Yes, as a matter of fact I have and I don't know what to do with it." He said, "Well, do just what I say - go to the Propaganda Ministry - do you speak any German?" I said, "Pretty well." and he said "Well, don't speak a word of German, and just hold out this certificate with the seal on it and say that you want to see Herr Vogt." I said, "Who's he?" and he said, "He's in charge of propoganda to the United States. Just be very innocent, just say you're a student from an American college and you want to find out the real truth about Germany. See what he says."

I followed instructions. We are so used to being screened for security nowadays that we assume that happened way back then. But, to the best of my recollection there was nothing like a metal detector to go through or a body search. I just walked in and followed instructions, and said that I wanted to see Herr Vogt. They looked a little puzzled and I had to wait quite a while. Then I was taken up one or two flights of stairs, as I recall, where there was this enormous office. A tough looking man looked up from his desk very quizzically - he didn't know who in the world I was. I went through the routine of "finding out the truth about Germany" and he took me for a sucker. He started telling me how Roosevelt was surrounded by Jews and so on and so forth. In the middle of his talk, there was a kind of a fanfare outside. I hadn't known it, but the Propaganda Ministry was right opposite the Reich Chancellory and he beckoned to me and said, "That's our Fuhrer coming out of the Reich Chancellory, if you want to see him." He went to the window, and opened the window, and there was Hitler coming in his car, just as a visiting dignitary would come from Blair House into the White House. He was in an open roadster and he was sitting next to the driver in the front seat with three men, probably security people, behind them. But here I was, looking right down on him! And it wasn't somebody who whizzed right by - he had to make a right angle turn, and there I was right at that point almost directly above him.

I can't resist telling you that some months ago, my 12 year old grandson in Massachusetts called me at 7:00 in the morning. Apparently his parents had given him some version

Library of Congress

of this and he had to do something for school, and he said, "Did you really see Hitler, grandpa?" And I said "Yes, matter of fact I had a chance to knock him off but I didn't have a weapon." So he said, "What happened?" I tried to describe this to him, and he said, "What about a flowerpot?"

Q: Bright kid!

FIERST: It never occurred to me, but what would have happened if I had seized a flowerpot and used it appropriately? Anyway, it was a fascinating year, as you can tell.

You probably heard about Harold Laski, of the London School of Economics. He was quite a radical at the time, and kept up a correspondence with a lot of Americans, especially Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. He did, by a conversation, change the course of my early career. I had a letter of introduction to him from my tutor, the Chairman of the Government Department at Harvard, Professor William Yandell Elliott. I sought Laski out in London and at that time I wanted to be useful to the world, to further the labor movement, and I guess I was quite an idealist, though I did have the sense by the time I was almost finished with this year's travel that the world was really going to collapse. I told him that I had been admitted to Yale Law School and that I had intended to go there before I left on this trip. However, I had seen so many fascinating things that were important to write about, that I was considering changing to be a journalist. He talked me out of it. He said that's really not a career, but if you learn a profession, like the law profession, you can be much more useful. Maybe I would have reached that conclusion myself anyway. I had already been admitted to the Columbia School of Journalism, as I recall, when I was so fascinated by the many things I was seeing, but I decided to go into law school after all. That's a rather long-winded version for what you asked me.

Q: No, it's a period that we'd like to capture, I think it's a very important one - one of those formative times, how people reacted. In law school, you went to Yale, for what was - three years? What did you specialize in, any particular, or was it some sort of general law?

Library of Congress

FIERST: It was general law. I was very interested in civil liberties, and I promoted a special course in civil liberties, to be given by Harry Shulman, who was then a professor concentrating mostly on torts. We tried to arrange a kind of a practical laboratory where Yale law students would be confronted with specific civil liberty situations. I am talking now mostly about those involved in the labor unions. It was the era of the sit down strikes and the attempts to break up unions and the formative years of the National Labor Relations Board. One summer I was a volunteer with the New York City Civil Liberties Committee and was kicked out of Jersey City which was in the domain of "Boss" Hague, Mayor Hague.

One of my classmates subsequently became a well-known professor of copyright law, and I recently saw him at our 55th Yale Law School reunion. I was reminiscing with him and I said, "You know, in my professional legal career I've been spending most of my time lately on copyright law, and I never took a course at the time in law school, in copyright law, and I've wondered why." He said, "It wasn't given then." So it was a totally new field for us, and again exemplifies what I mentioned earlier about serendipity. I'm not going to go into my professional career as a lawyer, but the kind of work that I did a lot of and am now doing quite a lot of, developed out of a series of coincidences, tracking back in a totally different context to two people that I met at the State Department.

Q: Let's talk about your connection - you graduated from law school in what, about 1939, in which all hell is getting ready to - broke loose - in Europe. Just to sort of move on until we get to the State Department, anyway, foreign affairs field, because it may not have been immediately the State Department, what did you do?

FIERST: I'd say that if I had known you then, and if you had made a bet with me whether I would ever end up in the State Department, I would have given you odds of a thousand to one, or a hundred thousand to one, that I would never end up in the State Department. It was never my ambition, and it had never really occurred to me. When I graduated from law school in June, 1939 and took the Bar Exam in New York and was admitted to the Bar,

Library of Congress

I practiced fairly briefly with a New York law firm that was known as Parker and Duryee. One of the partners was appointed Moreland Act Commissioner, as they called it then, by the Governor of New York to make a study of quasi-judicial action of administrative agencies. He asked for me to be released temporarily to be on his staff. I've got to mention one person who was in that law firm as a partner that, through serendipity, I'll skip ahead, if you don't mind, greatly influenced the course of my future career. This was a man named Robert Finley, one of the senior partners in the firm. I worked with him on one case that had nothing to do with civil liberties or labor law, and one day he approached me and said that the war in Europe was liable to expand and might have an impact on the United States. He had become a Captain in the New York State Guard, which drilled, I think, a couple of times a week in an armory off Park Avenue. He wanted to know whether I would be willing to join and get practice in marching and drilling and shooting. I have to say that I was very much of an interventionist by then and thought that it was inevitable that we would get involved, so I took him up on his invitation. We used to drill fairly elementary stuff, but something that I had not known before.

This became an important event in my career in early 1944. I was already in the Army, had entered as a Private, and I had become a Second Lieutenant, trained in anti-aircraft artillery. Through a series of coincidences, I had ended up in military government. We were being trained, along with British military government officers, to follow the troops after D-Day. We were in a place about 50 miles west of London called Shrivenham. We were kept busy, because we didn't know when D-Day was going to come, by taking long marches which were really quite delightful, if one might call it that at that period in the English countryside. One day I was coming back from one of these marches. As we approached our campsite, we were given the order to come in looking like a well drilled group. The British and the Americans were interspersed and we had different styles of marching, and I was on the outside file. We were, I am sure, looking ridiculous, and out of the corner of my eye who do I see but Major Bob Finley! He burst out laughing when he saw me - after all, he had trained me and the New York Guard to do much better than that.

Library of Congress

That night he came to my barracks. He looked me up, he hadn't known that I was there, and I hadn't known that he was there. He said he was working in Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF), in what was called the Legal Functional Unit. He was in charge of it, and his responsibility was to draft proclamations and orders to be posted when troops arrived in a conquered village or area. Of course, there had to be different ones for France and for Nazi - for Germany, if it reached that far, and for Austria. He said he had one assistant, and needed another one, and would I be willing, if he could arrange it, to do that? Of course, I jumped at the opportunity. If it hadn't been for that, that's why I went into this long detail, after D-Day, I probably would have been a military government officer someplace in Europe, and I strongly doubt that I would have ever come to the State Department.

That led to another series of coincidences. (I think I'm dragging this out too long, but I think it's worth pointing out how one's career gets affected by these serendipitous events.) At the time of the Battle of the Bulge, I was still in England. The day after Christmas (which is known as Boxing Day in England), I came to the office - half of us were on duty on Christmas and half on Boxing Day. The sergeant said that a cable had come in for me, maybe he wasn't supposed to show it to me but he would, and this was that I should be sent back to the States right away. They were looking for somebody with my qualifications in the office of the Chief of Staff in the Pentagon, in a new division which had been set up, called the Civil Affairs Division. I hadn't the faintest idea how this had come about, and when my commanding officer received this the following day he was furious, thinking that I had manipulated, maneuvered it somehow, but it turned out again to have been coincidence. A Lieutenant Colonel who had been Dean of the Buffalo Law School had followed a cousin of mine who had previously been Dean. I had come to know him in Shrivenham, and he had been called back to the Pentagon. This man's name was Mark DeWolf Howe, who later turned out to be the biographer of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. When he got back to the Pentagon, one division in the new Civil Affairs Division, the Planning Division, had four full Colonels in it and they wanted a junior officer with all kinds

Library of Congress

of special experiences. He felt that I had these qualifications, so they sent an order to bring me back immediately. When I finally reported for duty in the Pentagon, by that time there had been a reorganization and I was put in another division, and so on.

Through a long process of administrative changes and coincidences, I became very close to Major General John Hilldring, who was the Director of the Civil Affairs Division in the Pentagon - that's a story in itself - but later, when he was asked to come over to the State Department, asked by Secretary of State James (Jimmy) Byrnes to be Assistant Secretary, a new position, for Occupied Areas - Germany, Austria, Japan, and Korea - he brought with him about 8 or 10 of us, who had been about to be civilianized and go back to our normal professional lives. That's how I would have lost my bet with you, if you'd made one, because I found myself in the State Department as Special Assistant to Assistant Secretary of State Hilldring. This was in March, 1946.

Q: What was General Hilldring's background?

FIERST: His background is extremely important. Again, another example of serendipity. He had intended initially to be a journalist, and had gone to the Columbia School of Journalism. Then World War I broke out, and he ended up in the armed forces, had military service abroad and decided to make a regular career in the Army, in the lean days between WWI and WWII, lean from the point of view of the Army. He was a Captain, I believe, at the time the New Deal set up the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps). Military officers were put in charge of various districts. It so happened that he was put in charge of one district and the district next to him had in charge a Major named George C. Marshall. They became very close friends. The years went by, and during WWII, General Hilldring had become a Major General commanding an infantry division that was about to be deployed in the Pacific.

I think it was in San Francisco that they were given their final medical examinations. They found that there was something wrong with General Hilldring's heart, and they wanted to

Library of Congress

retire him on the spot for disability. As the story goes, General Hildring, in characteristic fashion, picked up the phone and called General Marshall who was, by this time, Chief of Staff in the Pentagon and said, "I realize that I can't serve you overseas in this condition, don't you have a place for me in Washington, where I can further the war effort?" Marshall brought him back to Washington, and he was first put in charge of relations with Congress. Then when this new division was set up in Washington, the Civil Affairs Division, known as G-5, he was made the first Director of it.

He was a formidable character. He had a booming voice - most people on his staff and most people he came into contact with were in awe of him, of doing anything that would run afoul of him. He was a brilliant fellow, spoke and wrote extremely well.

I want to interpolate at this point an incident which brought me to his personal attention and greatly affected my life and career after that. This was still back in the Pentagon, in the spring of 1945. I had been assigned to what was called the Economics and Supply Branch of the Civil Affairs Division, and I was something of a jack-of-all-trades where I was supposed to cover maybe 15 or 20 subjects by reviewing a tremendous flow of highly classified material that was coming in from the war in Europe, our troops in Europe. As a result of the Jewish background and sensitivity that I covered at the start of this talk, I was particularly sensitized to any material about the liberation of the concentration camps. As of that time, the Army was coming in for some criticism by journalists and by some American Jewish leaders and organizations, some of whom had guilty consciences about not having pressed hard enough during the war for more specific action on behalf of refugees or for bombing concentration camps, and so on. Anyway, out of this mass of Top Secret material that was flowing across my desk, one day I came across a bulky report classified Top Secret, why I don't know, of the liberation of one of the concentration camps. There was so much human interest in there about the GIs, falling all over themselves, doing whatever they could to help the survivors, sometimes literally killing them with kindness by giving them their rich chocolate bars which they shouldn't have done, and so on. I am citing this as an example not only of coincidence, but also of the

Library of Congress

personal interactions on policy in those days. Things happened very quickly, and we were all very intimate with each other.

I went in, I recall, with this material to Ernest Gross, who was a Major at the time and who later became Legal Advisor of the State Department - he had come over with us from the Pentagon. Later he was Deputy US Representative to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

I said, "Ernie, take a look at this - it is so different from the accounts appearing in the press - it puts the Army in such a good light." He said that Colonel Davis would be very interested in this. Colonel James C. Davis, (I think it's a "C") a prominent lawyer from Cleveland, was in charge of this Economics and Supply Branch, and he said, "Get up a memo right away from me (Gross) to Colonel Davis. But he wants everything boiled down to no more than two pages." How could I do that? All this valuable material compressed into two pages! Under pressure, I put it into two pages.

Colonel Davis called me in right away, and said something to the effect that "...this is terrific, we ought to get this to the attention of General Hilldring right away!" Up to this point I had gone to staff meetings, but had never actually had a personal relationship with the General. And he said, "Drop everything, get it in memo from me (Davis) to Hilldring, but he wants everything in no more than one page." How can I do that? Do it! So, I got it down to one page.

I learned later how Hilldring had reacted. He was a man of direct action, he always had a clean desk, and he believed in finding somebody whom he could trust, no matter what his rank, working with him and relying on him. He asked who had written the memo, "Who is this fellow, Fierst. Get him in here right away. Get this into a memo from me to Gen. Marshall", who was then Chief of Staff and a world figure, and he said, that "...he wants everything on half a page!" So I got it down to half a page, and I still remember how excited I was when Hilldring, sometime later, not long afterwards, came - he used to sort

Library of Congress

of waddle like a duck - into my little office and threw this memo on my desk triumphantly. In the upper right hand corner were the initials GCM. The memo had registered with Gen. Marshall. The important thing for my subsequent career was that from that moment on, I was Gen. Hilldring's displaced persons expert, particularly on the problems of Jewish displaced persons. He knew that I was Jewish. If he didn't know then, he found out in due course. We had a very close and important relationship for a long time afterwards.

Q: Now, we're in the State Department. What were the years you were in the State Department?

FIERST: From roughly the middle of May, 1946 to around December, 1955.

Q: When you arrived there, what was the impression of Jimmy Byrnes, particularly in his relationship to this foreign occupation type work that you were doing?

FIERST: I have to say that the only time I had a personal contact with Jimmy Byrnes was when he announced his retirement and he had a reception where we just filed by and he shook our hands. I never had any personal direct contact with him. But it came back to me that the reason that some of us were brought over to the State Department was that he had considerable contempt for what he called the "striped pants boys". I remember Gen. Hilldring describing how Byrnes had asked him to come over when Hilldring was still Director of the Civil Affairs Division in the Pentagon. Byrnes said, "We've got these four major conquered countries on our hands, Germany, Austria, Japan and Korea". Italy was not in that category. "What are we going to do, we have to run them, but I can't rely on these foreign service people to do that, they can't do anything practical. So I need somebody like you who'll be in charge, and bring over whatever staff you'll need." That's how Hilldring broke the news to some of us that he wanted us to come over to the State Department with him and be on his staff. I really look back on those days with considerable amusement because for a while, I still had my Captain's uniform, didn't have any civilian

Library of Congress

clothes, and was regarded along with others on General Hilldring's staff as sort of a military mafia!

This might be interesting to people who look back on that historical period: Everything was so intimate in those days - in terms of personnel, lines of authority. As I recall, there were maybe four or five Assistant Secretaries of State. I don't think that the Middle East had an Assistant Secretary of State until afterwards. Loy Henderson was Director of the Near East Division. This was important because Hilldring, through his own direct contacts, would go right to the top. He would often assume jurisdiction over officers in the department who were not in the direct line of command.

I'll give you one example which is kind of exciting and illustrates this point. One day, my office mate, who was in charge of press relations and who had also come over from the Pentagon, flipped a clipping onto my desk and said, "Why don't you do something about this?" This was because I was generally in charge of refugees and displaced persons on Hilldring's staff. This was a newspaper account of 48 Estonian refugees who had come across the Atlantic in two open boats, and landed in Florida. They didn't want to be sent back to their native country which was under the domination then of the USSR. They were not Jewish, had nothing to do with concentration camps, or anything like that. But it did, in my mind, have something to do with the spat we were in with the British, who were refusing to allow Jewish displaced persons to go to Palestine and were blockading the coast of Palestine. This was really just a humanitarian situation. They were going to be sent back. They had no visas, therefore they were to be sent back. I immediately went to see David Niles, one of President Truman's three or four assistants. He was also in what we used to call the "Old State Department Building". I had gotten to know him quite well, in connection with the Holocaust situation and Jewish displaced persons. I showed him the clipping and said, the President ought to do something about this. He said, "Well, it just so happens that the President is having his weekly press conference just this afternoon. Give me a statement and I'll see if I can have him deliver it." It was the easiest thing to draft,

Library of Congress

although it was very heady stuff. "...These are the kind of people that made America and I am directing the State Department to find a way of keeping them here."

So sure enough, the President issued the statement at his press conference that afternoon, and Dave Niles asked me, "... where do we go from here?" I said "Well, have the President send it over to the Secretary and tell him to do it." So, it went over to Dean Acheson, who bucked it down to General Hilldring, who bucked it down to me. I drafted a memo, as I recall, from General Hilldring to George Haering, who was the Director of the Visa Division. The Visa Division was really a kingdom in itself, and had really close connections with the Immigration Service, Justice Department and with the Hill. As I recall, I had Hilldring bucking it to George Haering saying, "... Here is a statement the President made, and sent it over for execution, so find a way of doing this and report back to me." Again, this was a blurred chain of command. But just to finish up on this little anecdote - Haering, sometime later, produced a mammoth memorandum, giving all the technical reasons why it was not possible to do this - that the quota was only a hundred a year, I think it was, and it was already over-subscribed and these people didn't have visas. Hilldring summoned Haering to his office. He wanted one-on-one, but he called me in afterwards with great gusto and described what took place. It still stands out in my memory, I must say with some relish! Hilldring said, "Mr. Haering how much do you get paid in your position?" Haering drew himself up and proudly said, "\$10,000 per year," which was the top government salary at that time. Hilldring said to Haering, "Well, when the taxpayers of this country pay you that tremendous sum, they expect you to bring some imagination and skill to your job. When the President of the United States announces to the world that he is directing the State Department to find a way of keeping these people here, he doesn't expect you to come back and say there are all kinds of technical reasons why that can't be done. So find a way of doing it, and do it!" And it was eventually done. That was the way some things were done in those days.

Q: Tell me, before we move to the occupied thing, what was your impression of how we, the government, State Department, and of course the military was heavily involved, faced

Library of Congress

up to the problems of the Holocaust, of the aftermath of the Holocaust, we're talking about '46, '47 and so.

FIERST: Well, I'll tell you, it came about to a large extent in the form of a battle with Ernest Bevin, Foreign Minister of Great Britain, on admitting Jewish refugees to Palestine. Bevin had agreed, or maybe initiated the idea, to have a 12 man Anglo-American committee on Palestine appointed - six British and six Americans. They were to look into, hold hearings, do whatever they wanted. They were to look into the overall problem of Palestine, in the context of what had happened in the Holocaust. He was reported to have told the British members that he would agree to put into effect anything that they could unanimously agree upon. He was very confident that there couldn't be unanimous agreement. The Anglo-American Committee made a tour of the displaced persons camps, particularly the Jewish displaced persons camps, held hearings there and then secluded themselves to write their report. Meanwhile, survivors of the Holocaust, who were not actually being taken into our displaced persons camps as our armies advanced, were following various routes into our zones of occupation in Germany and Austria. Part of it was pretty clearly improvised and organized. What might happen, for example, would be that some Polish-Jewish survivors had survived by reason of having gotten to the USSR before the Nazi armies incarcerated or exterminated other Jews. They wanted to come back to their former places of residences, in say, Poland and found when they got there that for one reason or another they weren't welcome. They would be encouraged, and sometimes organized surreptitiously, to continue on to Germany and Austria. And they were pouring into our displaced persons camps. We in the US zones were much more sympathetic than the British zones or the French zones and there was a dilemma that developed as far as the American-Jewish community was concerned and the American military. The conditions in the displaced persons camps began to deteriorate because these hapless people were pouring in, sometimes 1,000 per day, and overwhelming the Army, which regarded its major responsibility as the military government of Germany to root out the Nazis and to rehabilitate the German economy. They really had not been trained for this kind of

Library of Congress

humanitarian work. Generally, of course, the GIs and the officers who served their country overseas wanted to be demobilized as quickly as possible and come back to civilian life.

Both in the Pentagon before I transferred to the State Department and later in the State Department, considerable pressure was brought by our theater commanders, particularly by General McNarney in Germany, to close the borders to future entrants. They wanted to say, "Okay, we've reached the saturation point, we just can't take any more in." They were all coming in except for those who were following a clandestine route out through Italy and were intercepted by the British and taken to Cyprus. Except for those, the pressure was building up in the displaced persons camps and the zones of occupation. The Anglo-American Committee was very conscious of this. To the consternation of Ernest Bevin, they came out with a unanimous recommendation to transport 100,000 Jewish displaced persons immediately out of the DP camps and to admit them to Palestine. There was a lot of struggling byplay back and forth in the Pentagon and in the State Department as to how much pressure could be placed upon the British - should be placed upon them. Bevin was absolutely adamant, though, and made some unsavory remarks about President Truman catering to the Jewish vote. Basically, it was a nasty situation.

Q: I think one should put into context - Bevin had the problem which exists today, they had a mandate on Palestine. There were Arabs there who weren't going to look upon this very kindly. The British were caught betwixt and between a hard place.

FIERST: It was a nasty situation, and it was the major difference between our staunch ally - two staunch allies - the British and ourselves. Just the other day there were some moving stories in the New York Times and Washington Post and elsewhere about the 50th anniversary of the pogrom that took place on July 8, 1946 in Kielce, Poland, where 48 or 49 Polish Jews who had returned from eastern Europe to their former homes in Kielce, were brutally murdered by the Polish population. This was a particularly poignant memory to me, because, and I might just go into this a little bit in detail to give you an indication of how sensitive the whole subject was at that time and how we worked with

Library of Congress

it. In March of 1946, when General Hilldring and others were already over at the State Department, the War Department was receiving recommendations, urgent requests, of the field commanders in Germany in particular, to have authority to close the borders to any further entrants. I came up with the suggestion to General Hilldring that we have an off-the-record conference with Jewish leaders in the United States to get them to understand the difficulty of accommodating still more under these conditions, and asking for their help in stemming the flow, to the extent that they had any control over the situation. I remember General Hilldring telling me that he had taken this up with Dean Acheson. Acheson had been very skeptical that we could get Jewish leaders to agree on anything among themselves, but it was worth a try. So Hilldring said to me "...All right, set up the meeting." This is one of the examples that came to mind when you asked me earlier in this interview about my early background. I was very familiar through my upbringing as to who some of the key Jewish leaders were in the United States. We got them together in about the middle of March, 1946, and the War Department, actually Secretary of War Bob Patterson, came over. I did a briefing paper which I delivered to Secretary Patterson's house the night before. I also did a briefing paper for General Hilldring and Dean Acheson. Acheson started this meeting and then somebody came in and said the President wanted him to come over to the White House right away about something else. So he left General Hilldring in charge.

The Jewish leaders were very understanding of the situation and, without making specific commitments, they said they would do the best they could to stem the flow and they would be appreciative in their public statements of efforts that would be made to accommodate the occupants of the displaced persons camp under these terrible conditions.

Whatever they did seemed to work, because for a while there was less pressure from our military commanders to do something about it. But then came this terrible pogrom in Kielce and the flow started up again in a few days after that. Today is July 15th, it must be the 50th anniversary today or within a few days.

Library of Congress

We had another meeting with the Jewish leaders and outlined the situation to them. I remember that Colonel Buster came over from the Pentagon along with Secretary Patterson. Colonel Buster had a huge map of Europe and he had marked on it quite accurately, according to my own sources, either then or later, the routes that were being taken by the survivors to get into these displaced persons camps.

One of the Jewish leaders in particular, Jacob Blaustein, knew Secretary Patterson personally. Patterson was a very decent human being and gave the impression of being sort of embarrassed at having to come and take the hardheaded position that we just can't take care of any more. Mr. Blaustein was a tough business man in his private life, I think he was Vice President of the American Jewish Committee at the time. He was not known as a very emotional person, but he made a very emotional plea to Secretary Patterson that this was a remnant of the Jewish people after this terrible event, "...and it's very difficult, we know, to impose upon the American Armed Forces, etc. etc., please, for history's sake do whatever you can." It did produce humanitarian results. It was a very fascinating period of American and Jewish history.

Q: To follow through on the problem of the exodus, going to particularly the Cyprus thing, to have this mixed commission, making it were at loggerheads with the British over what to do - how did that work itself out?

FIERST: It worked itself out, I guess, in the special session of the General Assembly on Palestine. We were very much at loggerheads with the British. There was another commission, I have been referring earlier to the Anglo-American Committee on Palestine, which was British and American. But when Britain threw up its hands really and dumped the Palestine problem, as it was known, into the United Nations and said "We're leaving, you take over, we're getting out." The UN appointed a committee, I think it was called UNSCOP, United Nation's Special Committee on Palestine. They made a recommendation for partition of various areas in Palestine so that Jerusalem would be internationalized and part of the area would be a Jewish state and part would be an Arab state. Ben Gurion,

Library of Congress

along with Chaim Weizman, top Zionist leaders, recommended to the Jews involved in the situation that they accept the partition plan even though it did not give anyone nearly everything they wanted. The Arabs opposed it and 6 or 7 Arab countries initiated an attack against the nascent country of Israel. That is a long detailed story itself.

Q: Going back to the occupation thing, let's take what I assume is probably the shortest one of all of the various countries from what I've heard from other sources, the role of your office in State Department dealing with this foreign power, i.e. General Douglas MacArthur in Japan. That must have been a battle royal the whole time, wasn't it?

FIERST: It was, but I have to plead not so much loss of memory, but absence of involvement, in that particular part of the world, Japan. Korea, I got involved in in a different context - not in the occupation of Korea. But by the time of the invasion of June 25, 1950, the Office of Occupied Areas that I had been placed in, had ceased to exist and I had been transferred to, at first it was called UNA, United Nations Affairs, and then IO, International Organization Affairs. General Hilldring and his successors had long since left the State Department, and I was an assistant to Jack Hickerson, who was Assistant Secretary for United Nations Affairs.

I still remember vividly Sunday afternoon, June 25th. We had some out of town visitors we were showing around, but I wanted to drop in to the State Department to see if by chance I was needed on account of this invasion of South Korea and I bumped into Jack Hickerson in the lobby of the New State Department. He had just come back from a conference at the White House and said that I wasn't needed that afternoon. I mentioned earlier in this interview the importance of personal contacts and I had mentioned Ernest Gross, never thinking you'd get around to the subject of Korea, but by this time, Ernie Gross was deputy to Warren Austin at the UN. When a special meeting of the Security Council had to be called to get authorization for resistance to the invasion, I remember that Ernie's daughter had had a slumber party going on at the time and that the telephone rang in the wee hours

Library of Congress

of the morning and he had to grope through slumbering girls to get this order to call an immediate session of the Security Council to resist the invasion.

You had mentioned over the telephone the other day that you'd been in Japan. In the early days when I was in General Hilldring's office, he had a Deputy Administrative Officer, or maybe the Administrative Officer himself, Charles Kades, we called him Chuck. He was a Colonel. He left to be on General MacArthur's staff in Tokyo, and I read somewhere recently that he was largely responsible for the drastic and new, democratic constitution of Japan, that he drafted it in a short period of time. But I have to say that this was outside of my own area of responsibility.

Q: Your area of responsibility was with Germany and Austria?

FIERST: Germany and Austria when it came to occupied areas. When I got into United Nations Affairs, it was a wholly different range.

Q: Let's stick to the occupied areas first. What was the state of the occupation in 1946 - Germany first, what were the plans, and what were you doing?

FIERST: As I have indicated earlier, my main area of concentration was on the displaced persons problem, which was enough of a headache. Part of that, which I didn't get to but it's relevant here, I think, is that General Hilldring saw very clearly that part of the solution of the displaced persons' problem was to make exceptions in American immigration law, and admit a fair proportion, I'm not talking about only about Jewish displaced persons into the United States. And so we worked with an organization, an ad hoc organization which did succeed in getting legislation passed in 1948.

Q: The Displaced Persons Act, displaced persons - what we now term as refugees, but that was the term for the first...

Library of Congress

FIERST: General Hilldring, I might mention this to you, as it gives you a certain flavor of what he was like, was to appear before a joint session of the Senate Immigration Committee and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Vandenberg was chairing the meeting - he was Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Senator Revercomb of West Virginia was Chairman of the Senate Immigration Committee and was very anti-immigration. In preparation for that appearance, General Hilldring said to me that he wanted to be able to prove that by setting up and supporting the International Refugee Organization as the successor to UNRRA, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency, we would be saving money. This is the language that they understand on the Hill, he said. He directed me to find out from whatever sources I could how much it was costing the US Army per refugee or displaced person, and how much it could be done by an international organization such as IRO or UNRRA. I had a terrible time, it's not really my field, in getting a figure, and Hilldring said, "Look, do the best you can, but whatever we say will be accepted." He then made a dramatic appearance before this packed joint session. So many of my "do-gooder" friends were attending, representing various organizations, both Jewish and non-Jewish. They were filled with the humanitarian aspect, motivation, about what they were doing. I could practically hear them gasp when General Hilldring pounded the table and said, "This is costing too much - we've got to find a way to do it more cheaply!" and he said, "I believe that these unfortunate people, many of whom are barefooted, should be given shoes, but they don't have to be given GI shoes that at that time cost \$3. They can be given some cheap European shoes, but we can't do that. If the US Army handles it, it will have to meet its high standards of care. So, he said, let's turn them over to an international organization, which will assume responsibility, thus costing us less. When the Chairman invited questions, there were none - not even from the hostile Senator Revencomb. Whereupon Senator Vandenberg said: "Well, General, I guess you slayed them!" That really taught me a lesson, which General Hilldring had learned a long time before in his relations with Congress, that you have to make a case in their terms, and he was great at doing that.

Library of Congress

Q: How did it work out while you were...how long were you dealing with displaced persons?

FIERST: I would say roughly until about 1949.

Q: How had the situation changed by the time that you left?

FIERST: It had changed vastly. One area that I have not mentioned that was extremely sensitive was the issue of forcible repatriation. We had a terrible time with the Soviet Russians, who accused us of brainwashing Ukrainian, Baltic, and Russian displaced persons, and they wanted us to transport them whether they wanted to come back to the USSR or not. There were some ugly incidents where, in the early stages, they were loaded onto trains at the point of bayonets and then we had to change that policy. I had a hand in drafting some speeches for Eleanor Roosevelt when she was our Representative at the General Assembly, and replying to Andrey Vishinsky, the Soviet prosecutor in the purge trials and their Deputy Foreign Minister who represented them at the UN. They took a very hard line. "...These are our citizens, you're keeping them from coming back, deliver them to us...it's simply a transportation problem." They accused us of all kinds of insidious activities to avoid forcibly repatriating those Soviet DPs.

Q: Were you aware that many of these people who were going back would end up by being in very difficult circumstances, vis a vis the Soviet authorities once they got back, up to and including being purged and killed. Did we know that then, were we naive, or how did we feel about this at the time?

FIERST: I think we were naive at the time of Yalta. I don't profess to be an expert in that, but generally speaking, we were accused, not by the Russians, but by some American liberals, of having sold the Soviet displaced persons down the river at Yalta. And again, I am not an expert. If I had the time and the expertise I would look into those records, but my own impression, which may or may not be accurate, is, that at the time of Yalta,

Library of Congress

it never really dawned on us that hundreds of thousands of Soviet displaced persons wouldn't want to go back as soon as they could. It was really, from our point of view, a logistical problem. Transportation was so disrupted throughout Europe as a result of the war, and the Russians wanted to have some kind of priority given to their people to return - I mean, this is the way I think we viewed it. I had no direct responsibility for anything that had to do with Yalta, but I was aware, later on, of the US Government being on the receiving end of criticism from some Americans that FDR had not taken into consideration what would happen to the people who came back to the USSR.

Q: With your responsibility for the displaced persons, were you there when the Displaced Persons Act got in, and sort of international committees took over much of the responsibility?

FIERST: I was, and it was a very exciting time. I remember being asked to participate as a Representative of the Department in two different arrivals in the United States, one in Boston - I think it was the first ship coming over with displaced persons - and the other in New Orleans, the first one that came in to the South. For the one that came into the South, on that occasion, I remember, there was a special military plane that took us down. There were representatives from the Senate and House Immigration Committees. The Mayor of New Orleans had a reception and gave us all keys to the city. It was really a very heartwarming affair. And similarly in Boston.

I think that in spite of all the turmoil here we can look back with satisfaction on what was accomplished. We changed the atmosphere. It is not really realized nowadays how vehemently anti-immigration sentiment was in the United States at that time - including, especially, the American labor movement. I remember vividly accompanying General Hilldring to a meeting of the US Delegation to the General Assembly, when he was to make a presentation on the necessity of having an international refuge organization set up. I remember there was Senator Vandenberg there, and John Foster Dulles, Adlai

Library of Congress

Stevenson, and Congressman Sol Bloom, who was the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Hilddring made a very poignant presentation to the US Delegation about the plight of the refugees, and it was not just the Jewish ones - all of them. We had finished all of the logistical aspects of returning those who wanted to be returned or helping them to resettle in Australia or Canada or wherever it was. But he said that we have to set up this international refugee organization, and we have to take the leadership in doing it. We have to find places in other countries around the world, but let's face it, we have to initiate some legislation in our own country - take our fair share in the United States. At this point this American Congressman, Sol Bloom, who was very sympathetic because of his being Jewish, said, "Look, General, you don't seem to be familiar with the atmosphere on the Hill. If you even try to get any immigration legislation on behalf of displaced persons, you're going to end up with legislation that will bar all immigration to the United States. So I would advise you to let well enough alone." Hilddring wouldn't accept that, but I've often thought of that as a vivid example reflecting the atmosphere. The American Legion was against it. The general feeling was, and I think I'm oversimplifying it, twofold: one, all the millions and millions of servicemen coming back from abroad are going to be looking for jobs; and the other was, there are going to be a lot of radicals among these immigrants and how can we control them? The best thing is not to let anybody in. And this was quite a very prevalent attitude.

Q: Now you moved over to United Nations' Affairs. What was your job with United Nations' Affairs? This was 1949, you say.

FIERST: It's hard to define bureaucratically. Generally speaking, we wanted to generate and preserve an atmosphere of support for the United Nations. There were still a lot of isolationist attitudes in the United States. At the time we had, as I recall, a pretty good working relationship with Trygve Lie, who was Secretary General of the United Nations. On the other hand, there were some embarrassing incidents, where some Americans

Library of Congress

with extreme left-leaning backgrounds had gotten employment at the United Nations as international civil servants, and this led to an involvement with Roy Cohn and Senator Joe McCarthy. Roy Cohn at that the time was in his early '20s and was at the US Attorney's Office in New York making a big fuss. There was an uneasiness throughout the country about the Soviet Union, well justified, about the time of the Rosenberg execution (Ethel and Julius Rosenberg). My job, really, was the public relations aspect of it: To explain the United Nations to the American People - not verbally, but through literature, some of which came under my supervision - sort of putting out fires that were occurring. On a more constructive level, and this ties into the invasion of the Republic of Korea in June, 1950, we tried very hard, and I think we succeeded, in internationalizing the resistance to the invasion. We tried to get as many foreign countries as possible to contribute at least token military support forces so that we could say that it was not just the United States resisting, it was the United Nations against North Korea, and later China. There were a lot of fires that had to be put out at one stage. The UN forces were falsely accused of waging germ warfare, remember that? So we had to put that fire out.

Q: How did you deal with that?

FIERST: I don't really remember. It was a big crisis at the time.

Q: No, well it was just one of those accusations that I guess we kept going out and saying, "We're not doing it!" which we weren't. Well, what about...did you ever, during this time, this is 1949 on, this is the height of the McCarthy period. Did you run afoul of McCarthy at all, or that thing there, were you....

FIERST: That's a very low key question for a very high key answer. I had the dubious distinction of having been Senator McCarthy's Case Number One in the State Department. Just to personalize it, going back now to when Senator McCarthy made his subsequently famous (nobody paid too much attention at the time) speech at Wheeling, West Virginia - he accused the State Department of having 205 communists.

Library of Congress

Q: *"He says, 'I have here a list in my hand...'"*

FIERST: Yes. And then at the time Jack Peurifoy was Under Secretary for Administration in the State Department. His office was on the same floor as ours in New State, or whatever we called it at the time. I knew him quite well. He exuded confidence that if they gave McCarthy enough rope he would hang himself. He and the administration grossly underestimated McCarthy's ability to manipulate the media. The media were generally anti-McCarthy, but they couldn't help covering the news when he called a press conference, and reporting it. I remember vividly when the administration decided to challenge McCarthy on the floor of the Senate, and they said "...what are you talking about, cite chapter and verse." The morning press reported that Senator McCarthy had given 81 case histories in a long speech before the Senate, but without mentioning names. That morning, I remember picking up the Congressional Record, which was delivered to my office every morning. I was primarily following displaced persons legislation and related legislation. I saw this long speech by Senator McCarthy and I remember being curious as to whether I would recognize anyone. It never dawned on me that I might be one of the 81! I got no further than Case #1, which was unmistakably me, he didn't mention any names - just gave the case summary, that he was talking about a Special Assistant to a General was an Assistant Secretary of State, and so on. He threw in there as fact what had been a number of allegations that had been subsequently investigated and disposed of.

Let me just interrupt myself and take a few steps back. When the notorious 80th Congress had come under Republican control, they conducted an investigation of the State Department. The State Department had made available to the 80th Congress Committee all of its personnel files and they had (I didn't pay any attention to these personnel matters in those days) surprisingly, given the State Department a clean bill of health. But there were in these files many case histories. Unbeknownst to me, mine was one of them. I forget the number of my file - they didn't use names. I think it was 51 or 52. They had a master list, which was correlated to the case numbers, and in my case there were three

Library of Congress

individuals with whom I had dealt who warranted investigation. They investigated, and they found that there was nothing to any of the allegations bearing on security.

I might just mention one of them as an example of what the atmosphere was in those days. This might sound self-serving, or self laudatory, but it helps fix the date in my mind. Just before we were leaving the Pentagon to come over to the State Department in early March 1946, a Major came into my office, a heavily decorated Major, who had rows and rows of ribbons, and combat stars on them. He didn't have an appointment, but introduced himself as Henry Collins. He said that he'd just gotten back from overseas and he'd been part of the occupation force in Germany. He'd come across a lot of displaced persons in his work and felt very sympathetic to them. He understood we handled this problem and he'd like to work with us. I was interrupted at this point, somebody reminding me that we had a staff meeting, a special meeting with General Hilldring. So I said, "Can you remain here until we finish this staff meeting?" He said he could, and it turned out that, unbeknownst to me, this was a staff meeting in my honor, and Gen. Hilldring awarded me the Legion of Merit. He pinned this ostentatious looking medal on me, and I remember a feeling of embarrassment walking back to my office. I had not been in combat, and here I had this dazzling medal on to resume my talk with this Major. I explained to him that a number of us were going over to the State Department very shortly, as we were being civilianized, with Gen. Hilldring, in this new office. If he was still interested, and if we were short of personnel, I would look into adding him to our staff. He went into a long bureaucratic history about how he had been working for one department and had been on loan to Senator Kilgore's Investigating Committee and had gone into the Army. So it wasn't a brush-off by me, but it was, I didn't know what the situation would be - "get in touch with me if you're still interested." He did come around to see me when I was in the State Department. He was then in civilian clothes. He said he could get an arrangement with his agency, to get them - some well-known agency - which agency had lent him to Senator Kilgore's committee - he could get them to lend him for three months to the State Department. So he wouldn't be on our payroll, and would not fill a personnel slot.

Library of Congress

Q: It was a government agency?

FIERST: Yes, it was a US government agency something like the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. We were absolutely overwhelmed at the time. This seemed like a godsend. Here was this guy experienced in displaced persons, and was interested in them, and so on. I wasn't a personnel person, so I took it up with General Hilldring and he said "...sure, if we can get him for free, do whatever is necessary." So I asked him to draft the kind of letter that he would want from us to his agency to lend him to the State Department for three months, as I recall. But then, my drafting initials appeared on the letter rather than his when I sent it forward for General Hilldring, I think it was, to sign. I am going into this detail to show how it started. He came to work for us, and he wasn't really very good. When it came time to renew the three month period, we decided that we had had enough. Lo and behold, at some stage thereafter, there were these hearings where Elizabeth Bentley appeared before the House Un-American Affairs Committee, and she identified this Henry Collins as the head of one of the communist cells in the 1930's. Meetings had been held at his house and so on. This had never come up, there was no reason for it to come up, in our conversations, or in the kind of work that he had done.

He was one of the three. In McCarthy's summary, instead of saying "...it was alleged that..." it was as though this Number One had manipulated the bureaucracy to bring this communist in to the State Department. After reading this Congressional Record statement, I went to see Jack Peurifoy, and he said that "...we have no security problem with you at all." I had Top Secret clearance all the time.

So I did lead, I have to say, kind of a charmed existence, in that McCarthy never released, at least at that stage, my name, or the names of the others, but he went on in his presentation to the Senate to say that these were all terrible people, radicals, brought in to the State Department, etc. etc. But the worst was what he called "The Big Conspiracy, by the Big Three - Numbers One, Two and 81". Number Two, as it turned out, was John Carter Vincent, whom I had met maybe once or twice when he was coming into General

Library of Congress

Hilldring's office. I really had nothing to do with the Far East in those days, or ever, other than I would go to assist displaced persons in a special area. Number 81, I learned, was a woman whom I don't think I had ever met, or even heard of, named Esther Brunauer. She had something to do with USIA.

I was saved for quite a while as far as publicity was concerned because McCarthy kept on jumping from one thing to another. When he'd be challenged, somebody would feed him some information and he would focus on that.

I do have to recount this, to show you what the atmosphere was like. It was not a very pleasant time to live through. Jack Peurifoy had asked me if I would mind meeting, on an off the record basis, or not for attribution basis, anyway, with Stuart Alsop, who was a very prominent columnist at the time. He wanted to write a column about The Big Three, with the understanding that he wouldn't mention their names. So I had lunch with Stuart Alsop, and he wrote an excellent column afterward. I have to say that, as I recall, only one of my friends came close to recognizing me. But it was all a bunch of nonsense. As a result of that, I wouldn't say I had a friendship with Stuart Alsop, but it prepared me for a telephone call I got from him one day, saying, "I am up at the Hill now, and Senator McCarthy has just announced that he's holding a press conference tomorrow at 10:00 o'clock, where he is going to announce the name of the top Soviet espionage agent in the United States, who is still in the State Department." So he said, "Do you have any idea who that might be?" I hadn't the faintest idea. (I should have mentioned earlier all the atmosphere about Alger Hiss and so on.) He said, "I hate to have to tell you this, but the word around here is that it is probably going to be you!"

So I hung around the news ticker the following day in the State Department, as McCarthy had his press conference. Lo and behold, he came up with the name that, in my ignorance, I had never heard of before, Owen Lattimore. Poor Owen Lattimore, he really went through a really grueling period as a result. A few years later, just to complete this aspect of it, some mutual friends, some friends of ours in Baltimore, called up and invited

Library of Congress

us to dinner. They said, the only other guests we will have will be our other dear friends, the Owen Lattimores. By this time, he had been exonerated after weathering a terrible ordeal. This was a small house, and the women were in the kitchen, the host was mixing drinks and here I was sitting on a sofa next to Owen Lattimore. I said, "I know that you are wondering who in the world am I, and I have to tell you that, when I first heard your name, I must admit that I hadn't heard of you before, but I was glad it was somebody other than myself!"

So that's the way things went in those days. It was very exciting to be in the government, but also there were some very tense times.

Q: Did you find that Under Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, going through these times, did you feel a lack of support at all?

FIERST: Definitely, and I'll tell you of one other incident that comes to mind. Shortly after Dulles took over as Secretary, there was an Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations who was brought in. He was a member of Congress, a Republican, I don't remember his name...later he became Republican National Committee Chairman. I had not met him. I came back from lunch one day and I had a phone call from this man, whom I had not met before. He said, "Can you come right to my office?" At that point, McCarthy was riding high in the country and he said, "Senator McCarthy wants you up there right away, before his committee." So I went in to see this man, and he very matter-of-factly said, "Go to such and such a room, and we will get a car for you." I said, "Now, wait a minute, what's this all about? I have been in the Department X number of years and have never had less than Top Secret clearance. I'm entitled to know under what circumstances I'm being called up there. Is this an executive session, or a public session?" McCarthy was having public sessions on TV. The Assistant Secretary was very nice, but seemed a little embarrassed, and said, "That's a fair question, I'll try to find out." He asked his secretary to get the name of a new assistant who was liaison with the Senate Government Operations Committee - Jack Leahy. He called him out of the hearing and Leahy said, "McCarthy is

Library of Congress

looking into the activities of the USIA.” The head of the group that puts out literature was testifying about a pamphlet they had put out about the United Nations and the American role in the United Nations. McCarthy asked him who had reviewed his material, and under whose auspices he did this, and he mentioned my name. McCarthy said, “Oh yes, he's a bad egg, get him up here right away!”

I dropped everything, and went up. Luckily, I had been given the option of having my security hearing under the old administration or under the new one. It was due to be in a few weeks. The significance is that I had reviewed my past history in preparation. A lot of these things that get blurred in your memory were quite fresh in my mind as a result of my preparation. I'll give you one example. When I was sworn in, before McCarthy - it was an executive session - I remember saying to myself on the way up there, “...just don't be provocative here, but show McCarthy you would not be a good witness to put on national television.” There was one American diplomat who had more or less defected to the Chinese communists at the time. I have forgotten his name. McCarthy, sitting up on the raised platform as Chairman, looking down, said to me at the beginning, “Tell us about your relationship with this particular person...”

Q: Was it Fields, or something like that?

FIERST: No, Fields was in Eastern Europe. So I said, “I don't know him, never met him, never talked to him.” McCarthy said, “How come you used him as a reference in your application to the State Department?” Now, if I had been on national television and had been confronted that way without advance preparation, I would have said that I don't remember why I did that if I did. But I knew for a fact that I had not, because I had reviewed all that. So I just categorically denied it, and he casually went on to something else. He had just been making it up. That's the way he operated. So I ended up, about an hour and a quarter later, at this executive session hearing, and nothing ever came of it afterwards.

Library of Congress

Q: You weren't looking bad, so he didn't want to...

FIERST: He didn't want to put me on national television. It was really a terrible period to have gone through, because the atmosphere was such that decent people were intimidated. I remember, for example, this was before the incident I just mentioned, on a Friday afternoon, I had been called in by Arch Jean, who was in charge of personnel for the State Department. He said, "I am calling in those who are prominent on McCarthy's list. We have complete confidence in you, but there is this hearing the Senate committee is going to have on Monday, when McCarthy is going to be presenting his case. As you know, you're Number One, so it is logical you'd be the first one that he'd come to. We're going to take a strong position in defense of all those on the list, because we have checked them all out, but we're advising each one to get his own lawyer." So I called up a prominent lawyer in New York, Goldthwaite Dorr, who had worked for the Secretary of War, Stimson, a long time ago, but also had been brought in to handle some displaced persons aspects on the Hill. He recommended that I get in touch with a man I had worked with on displaced persons legislation, Senator John Sherman Cooper, of Kentucky, who had just been defeated and was going with a prominent law firm in Washington.

So I got in touch with him immediately and he had me meet him in a hotel near Union Station, and listened very sympathetically. He said, "I am just new in this firm, (it was a quite prominent law firm in Washington), and I would like really to be your lawyer, but I have to check it out with my new partners. So let's meet tomorrow, a Sunday, at a particular time at the same place. When I met with him he was so apologetic, mumbling and embarrassed. He said he had taken it up with his partners. They felt that it was really too controversial for him to represent somebody who had been attacked by McCarthy. But he said, "I've written out something for you that I recommend that you say when, as and if McCarthy attacks you publicly. I'll be glad to meet with you informally, just to give you advice." I took one look at his draft, it was on a yellow lined paper and he had worked it over and over, and it epitomizes the difficulty that people like us were in. What he

Library of Congress

had drafted was almost word for word the statement that Alger Hiss had made, over and over and over, "I am not now, nor have ever been in the Communist Party. I am a loyal American, etc..." This is why I have not had a very high regard for what Alger Hiss did. Intrinsically, what he did was bad, but also it poisoned the atmosphere.

Q: It really did, I've always had this feeling about Alger Hiss. He, to use an old term, he let down our side, you might say. He really - he lied. And he lied at a time which discounted an awful lot of very good people.

I'm just trying to figure out, is there anything else you think we should cover in this period?

FIERST: I think I've rambled around quite a bit without any advance preparation. I'm not sure if I've covered the areas you had in mind...

Q: Part of Oral History is to catch the atmospherics. And it's not just obviously the McCarthy thing, but dealing with the displaced persons' time and getting ready for things at the end of the war, with the United Nations.

Just one last thing, then, on the United Nations. What was sort of the biggest problem you had selling, you might say, as you saw to the American people about the United Nations?

FIERST: The biggest problem, I suppose, selling to the Congress, was the inflated bureaucracy of the United Nations. The Secretary General, whoever he was, whether it was Trygve Lie or Dag Hammarskjold, or his successors, is always under enormous pressure from other countries to have their nationals on the staff both from the point of view of influencing policy, that was certainly the case on the Soviet side, and from the point of view of having good jobs. So there were these enormous budgets that were projected, of which the United States had to shoulder a major share, and that really poisoned the atmosphere. There was a constant ideological and strategic struggle, as you know, during the time of the Cold War. Sometimes it was hotter than cold in the Soviet Union. I think that there developed a genuine skepticism on the good part of the American

Library of Congress

public that we were losing control to third world countries that didn't understand what our own security interests were. There was a lot to that. There was a lot of well intentioned international liberalism about the colonies that used to be in Africa, for example, being emancipated from the kind of colonialism that they had been subjected to. So many of them turned out to be terrible disappointments that it affected the confidence the American public had in the United Nations. Anyway, they were very interesting times.

In conclusion: I feel that I have just scratched the surface of my varied experiences in the State Department so many long years ago. Hopefully, at least I have given you a bit of the flavor of professional life in those times and those places.

End of interview