



Max M. Kampelman Papers

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Interview of Max Kampelman
U.S. Ambassador to the Madrid Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe
1980-1983

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Interview conducted by Neil Simon of the U.S. Helsinki Commission

Slate

Q: We're back with Max Kampelman, so Max, there's a big interest in knowing about the Madrid Conference./ This was a seminal meeting in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. You were tasked with leading the U.S. delegation. As you told me, you thought this might be a short assignment and it was no such thing.

Max: Well, I was told it would be three months. It lasted 3 years.

Q: When you got the call to go to Madrid for this conference to rep the US and work on the Helsinki Process, what did you first think?

Max: Well, I must say my first reaction was that I was not interested in taking on a new responsibility. But I learned about it somewhat and I had used to teach political science. I was well aware of the international problem. Um I was also well aware of the fact that the Soviet Union had moved itself into a key position in Europe by virtue of of the Helsinki Process having been developed. And uh the idea then of being part of it uh appealed to me, though I didn't seek it. Uh and uh I think I should say here, maybe I didn't say it earlier, but I think I should say it here that among the people I talked to to get briefed was Arthur Godlberger [sic] who had been at the 2:01 first meeting of the Helsinki Process in Belgrade. And uh when I was familiarizing myself with the process because I really didn't know much about the process until I received the appointment, uh but as I briefed myself on it I obviously went to see Justice Goldberg. It happened that he and I had both been friends long before both of us came to Washington and he told me that these three months in Belgrade was the most miserable political experience of his life. And I'm, I think I'm quoting him accurately, and he urged me not to go, as a friend. Now that's fine. I, it registered with me, but I also saw that it was going through. We were having a session and uh I familiarized myself therefore with the process. Dante Fascell who was the chairman was quite helpful to me.

I must say, and I don't think I said it earlier, but I must say that the staff director of the commission was quite hostile. I don't think it was personal, um and the reason I don't think it was personal is that I knew his father and had helped his father, Spencer Oliver, who was with the AFL-CIO, so I don't think it was a personal thing. I think it was an institutional thing, and uh Oliver had hoped that Dante Fascell would be the chairman and that he would run it. So that was a problem I had to overcome.

Q: That said, was the staff at the commission at the time, I remember you telling me in our last discussion that the staff were somewhat helpful as far as you reaching out for information in the process and having that dialogue. Was the Commission a place that was a source of –

Max: Let me say, I could not have functioned without the commission. The staff of the commission was superb and they were really the root of our commission was the staff from the commission. From the State Department I selected a senior to be the number two man. This too was a problem with Spencer. Spencer though, and I understand why he thought it, because he knew more about it than anybody else, then Spencer was my number two. Warren Zimmerman was my number two. And we also selected as my secretary- I don't mean my stenographer- a career State department man because it was clear to me that I should be sending a report back to the state department and he was the one who would send that report to the state department. So, I guess what I'm saying is it ended up being a highly successful three years, but the idea of it being more than three months did not even occur to me as we got involved in it. But I learned as I went on, and I want to add also, since you're from the Commission, I could not have functioned without the commission staff. They knew all about the process. They had been involved in Belgrade process. They were committed to the ideals of the Helsinki Process and a number of them have remained my friends. They were superb. I had one incident for example – well, what took a long time was getting the rules established between the two functions. The assumption was that this might take a day or two. It lasted three months. I can't even now as I think back understand why it would have been in the Russian interest to prolong this because they took a licking, but somehow it was not my intent – I went to Madrid thinking I'd only be there for a few weeks and uh, but I saw the Russians were somehow manipulating around, and I smelled it. And I also saw an opportunity to tighten up the free group. Um for example, I learned from Warren Zimmerman that there wasn't going to be a NATO caucus because one of the things that I thought of is to work closely with the West and I learned there wasn't going to be a NATO caucus, and I wondered why there wouldn't be a NATO caucus and Warren knew the British representative, and they talked, and I got briefed and a lot of it had to do with tensions in Belgrade, and the United States apparently did not win friends in Belgrade, so I had to take it upon myself to get this thing started, which I did.

Matter of fact, what runs through my head now is not something particularly learned or revolutionary but interesting. I knew with the western group that we needed a caucus. First of all I was new, they were experienced, and I wanted us to work together, um, I also had met in Washington, the Romanian delegate who spoke English, and the State Department telephoned me and said the Romanian was there wanting to be briefed and would I meet him, and I said 'of course.' Well, I found he was a teacher at one of the universities, uh spoke English, we got acquainted. When I flew out some weeks later to Madrid and landed in Madrid on the airplane, I didn't know anybody there. I was met by the embassy and they took me to the hotel where I am staying and it occurred to me that the Romanian might be there early, just as I was there early. So I had warned Warren about the Romanian and I invited him for, I can't remember whether it was lunch or dinner, and he brought one person, and I brought along Warren. We got acquainted, in effect, at the end of it incidentally, during one of our conversations, I learned something about his personal life which was good and useful to me, with teaching and all the rest.

Anyhow how we left our lunch or dinner, I no longer remember, he said to me, 'You know Mr. Ambassador, I am going to have to tell 'uncle' about our meeting.' Assuming I knew he meant the Russians, and I said, 'Go ahead, tell 'uncle' about it.' I had Warren Zimmerman, who had a friend in the British embassy, tried to group some [inaudible] together, so he persuaded the British representative to have a meeting of NATO at the British embassy, which we did. And uh we talked about this situation, and I reported on my meeting with the Romanian. And they learned something that they hadn't previously known, but I was sharing with them, which they liked.

But that was only a single meeting, and at the end of the meeting, coming close, I planned this actually, I ought to confess to this. I said to the NATO group, at the British embassy, where we met, I said, I realize there has been no decision made on the caucus of NATO, but I just wanted you to know, I am meeting the Russian tomorrow, and it's been arranged by the Romanian, because I asked the Romanian to bring us together. Why don't we all meet at the U.S. Embassy, U.K., U.S.-- and I will report to you on my meeting with the Russians; that started the NATO caucus. They liked the idea that we were sharing. That too was interesting because I got a call from the Romanian, and he said he had reported it to his 'uncle,' and also reported that I have suggested that we have lunch or dinner together, which I did suggest.

So I said 'I don't know, I got lost a block from here, he is the Russian ambassador to Madrid, he must know the restaurant better than I do. So let him decide, and I'll go there.' I can tell you it took a few hours with that the Russian wanted, and I told the Romanian, who spoke English, and I said, 'Look, he is trying to make it look as if it is my responsibility and not his.' I said, 'Fine, let's meet in my hotel, in my suite, I don't mind letting everybody know I am meeting with him.' And that is the way we got ourselves involved.

Q: This is historic; this is a time when these types of meeting were not taking place.

Max: The Caucus was wonderful, the Swedes and the Finns, that middle group, I urged them to have their own caucus, and I got to know them, and I said, 'Keep together, you will be stronger as you keep together.' I advised them that, otherwise you would be ignored. They did it and it made it easier for us to get together, but I recall when we were arguing, who is inviting whom. That's why I decided well let the world know that I invited the Russians and they came to my hotel suite. We had also an interesting thing, I cannot remember now which Jewish holiday it was, but that few days later, was a Jewish holiday. I remember making a point with the Russians that I couldn't meet on that time because I was going to the synagogue. I wanted to put that right on the table; and I did the same thing with the NATO caucus. And it worked. I don't know if that is what you want for me, but that is what is running through my head.

Q: I appreciate hearing these stories again. I guess it would be good to fast forward a bit to what you accomplished in Madrid and how you tried to get the conference to end and the conversations you had with President Reagan, and your counterparts in Russia, and how it played out to end those three years.

Max: As you know I have not publicized that experience, maybe I should, I have no reason not to. But a meeting that was supposed to last for three months, lasted for three years. And uh, it

was being talked about as a strange development, but the Russians were stubborn about it, and frankly, I was stubborn about it.

Now, your point. My contact at the Russian embassy was the number two man at the Russian embassy, who was a general, General Kondrashev and he spoke English. The number one man was a deputy foreign minister. Every year there was a new deputy foreign minister in Madrid. They were circling around. But always, the number one man was the foreign office deputy foreign minister. Kondrashev was the number two man and identified himself to me as a KGB general, and he spoke English fluently. He has been in the U.S. numerous times, and he spoke English fluently.

Frankly, I liked him, and we got along quite well, candidly, frankly, it was this way [rams hands together], but we talked. And he was also present when I had my meeting with the number one man, because the number one man never spoke English, so he was there. Now, after two years of this, I knew everything about his family and his life, he met my family when they came out for visits. And I could talk to him. And I got an inkling that he was under pressure to end the meeting. I say inkling, because he never really said it to me. Uh, but I know that he knew that Russia was taking a licking at the meeting -- as they were.

And he knew that I even had contacts with some of the Eastern Europeans, without him. And that I could take on a one on one basis. I didn't ask anyone to risk their jobs, but personal things, 'How are your children?' Those kinds of things. I had a relationship with them. And I came back on one of our breaks, to Washington. Because, every few months we came back. And I met with Shultz, which I always did, with the Secretary in that connection. You know I was appointed by a Democrat and reappointed by a Republican. I told Shultz, in his office, and I said that I smell the end of the meeting coming.

And I smelled we were going to get everything we asked for, we meaning the West. And I did smell that, and I shared it with him. I did not go further than that, but I had reason to go further, but did not. I smelled this Kondrashev, and I concluded that he had received instructions from Moscow to end the meeting because they were being hurt so badly throughout Europe.

Q: You had been naming names--

Max: Well, that's right, we were really giving them the business, anyhow, so Shultz said 'Great, time to go home.' He then looked at me, he said, 'You don't look very happy,' which surprised me, because I was delighted at the end of the meeting. You know, it's a rough kind of business. And I said, 'I am not conscious of any problem.' And I will never forget this, he said, 'Max, you think they are going to accept everything we and NATO put in?' And I said, 'I think so. They want to end the meeting.' And he said, 'Well, you don't look very happy about it,' which was a surprise. I felt delighted. And he said, 'No, something is troubling you. He saw something I was not aware of.'

And then he asked me a question, he said, 'If you could now put in what our position should be, how does it differ, from what NATO put in on the first week?' Which was a very good question, and I thought a few seconds. And I said, 'Everything we asked for two years ago, three years ago

were words, we did not ask for human beings. I think now I would want to ask for human beings.' And as you know I was mentioning names constantly, of prisoners, so he said, 'That is it Max, isn't it.' So we spent a few minutes talking about the reality of switching after we have a group of demands, and changing our demands, and we both agreed this wasn't practical, it wasn't proper. I agreed with that and uh he obviously saw it.

We were on a couch. And he leaves the couch and he goes to his desk, calls somebody and says 'Let's go. We are going to see the president.' And off we go in his car to see the president. The president knows we are coming, but he does not know why we are coming. So we level, obviously with the president, and lay it all out. He responds as followed, and to the best of my knowledge this has not been published, and George Shultz had not heard about this to this moment.

And what he said was that on the first week that he became president, he asked Al Hague, his new Secretary of State, to bring the Russian ambassador to visit with him, and the Russian ambassador came, and he said to the Russian ambassador, 'We have serious problems now between us. If your bosses-- I am the new president --if your bosses want to have a better relationship with me, the new boss of the United States, I want a signal; the signal I want is the Pentecostals we have in the American embassy basement should be permitted to go home free without being arrested.' He said, 'I made that extremely clear to the ambassador and I never got a response.' And a couple of years later he never got a response, so that is where his head was.

Which was not much different of our talking about persons, so we began talking about this. And he asks me, 'How are you going to do this, Max?' I said, 'Mr. President, I haven't got the slightest idea, I did not come here with a plan.' So in the sense he says, 'Do what you can,' leaving it up to me. So we now go to the door and he goes to his desk. He says, 'Max, wait a minute.' And I go back to his desk and he opens up his desk and takes out a sheaf of paper this high and says, 'Max, see what you can do to help these people.'

Obviously these people, as in the papers. Shultz and I go outside his office -- there is a chair near the secretary -- to see what the papers are. And the papers are the names of the victims of, mostly the names of Jewish refuseniks. So obviously I took the thing with me to Madrid and I leveled with my friend, and he was a friend of mine. The KGB general and I reported to him thoroughly.

And, I reported to him thoroughly. I told him exactly what happened, I told him about my meeting with Shultz, and I told him about the meeting with Reagan, I told him about the list I had, and, of course, he exploded. 'You cannot change rules in the middle of the game, we've been on this now, it's the third year, you cannot do that, this is not the way the civilized world works.' I heard him out and said, 'Look, my friend, you're not the Russian government, you don't make decisions for the Russian government. I have given you a message to your bosses. It's a message from the President of the United States. Whether you like it or they like it, you have an obligation to give him the message I give you from the President.' And a few days later, I get a phone call from him, he has to see me. So I knew it was a response. And he says 'I am authorized to negotiate with you.' Those are the words, 'I am authorized to negotiate with you,' but he says there are some conditions. So I said, 'What are the conditions?' So he says, 'Well, one condition is, that only three Americans must know, that we are negotiating.' And three

meaning, Shultz, Reagan and Kampelman, because I made it clear no one else knew about it. "Secondly, I am the only Russian you can talk to about this." The only Russian you can talk to about the-- Thirdly, is as I remember, he said, 'You must not talk to your friends about this, and you must not talk to my friends about this.' So it was just the two of us. And so I said, 'Sergei, I have some problems, some questions to ask him.' He only wants the three Americans to know about this. But I said, 'What do I do with Shultz, who's talking to Gromyko every day. You're the only Russian he can talk to? You mean he can't talk to Gromyko about it?' We talked about it. And he repeated, 'I am the only Russian you can talk to about this.'

And I want to say, I gave him the list the President gave me, and I can only tell you, that we got out, the Israelis told me then, more than one million Jews. That of course is something that's never been published. It no reason should it be, frankly, But you know we had a little problems coming up, you gotta understand this and you do understand this as we're talking about this. The meeting in Madrid, I mentioned hundreds of names, you may know this, that's interesting, let me just say one word about that. We broke up, we didn't really break up the preparatory meeting, which began in Madrid, never really broke that up, until the day we were suppose to start the formal session. And it was that kind of tightness. And on the opening day, just formal, I had a press conference. The U.S. press, the British, French and what not. The next morning, the number one man at the Russian embassy stands up at the meeting at criticizes me for having had a press conference --sticks a knife a little bit, "you've known since Belgrade, we don't publicize these things you know." So he finished and sat down, so I stood up immediately and responded to everybody, that 'I fully appreciated what the Russian ambassador has said. After all it comes from a society where there is no free press, and they also live in a society which is really embarrassed by how cruel they are to many of their citizens.' 'But,' I said, 'since we are meeting and now, it was my intent to bring these matters to attention of anybody who was interested in it.' And I had a press conference during the three years every single day I was in Madrid. And you know, how it came, and we got out, I know, an incident comes to my mind, I'll stop. About, seven or eight months ago, I was making a talk in New York. One of the foundations had a meeting they wanted me to talk, which I did. And as I left the dais, there was a man at the bottom of the dais, waiting for me, and shook my hand. And he said, 'You don't know me, Mr. Ambassador, you don't know me,' but he said, 'I heard you on the radio, every single night. All of us tried to get the signal because we knew you were broadcasting at night and we were in the prisons.' And he said, 'and then one night I'm listening, and I hear you mentioning my name.' And he starts to cry, which I did too. 'Now I'm in a free country.'

We did get out about a million people, the Israelis. At one point, he comes to me during this [inaudible] and he says, 'Problems with the Pentacostals' then I say, 'what are the problems with the Pentacostals' because they wanted.. 'They want to go to Israel.'

I said, 'They don't go to Israel, they're not Jews' 'My authority,' he says, 'is to put people on a airplane in Moscow and let the airplane go to Tel Aviv. They don't want to go to Tel Aviv, they want to go to Germany, I can't allow anyone to go to Germany.' So I said, 'Let's put them on an airplane to Tel Aviv, and I'll have a plane take them from Tel Aviv to Germany,' and I did. They did that, you know. Anyhow, it was an interesting experience.

Q: It's great, it's great to hear you retell it.

Max: I forgot what I said the first time, so

Q: There was something you said the last time about, I asked you about, what the Madrid Conference and that process shows? What we take away from it? And whether it shows the strength of the Helsinki process and a holistic view of security? And you said something succinctly about the strength of the process. Do you care to reflect on that again?

Max: Well I don't mind, I don't remember exactly what I said. Well you can use that, if you have it, but I don't know what I said, what I do know is that there is no substitute for talking. That's one thing that -- communicating. It's the essence really of the human being it strikes me.

I don't think that -- There's a risk in doing this you know. The risk is that sometimes the word can replace the deed. And you've got to be extremely careful not to let the word replace the deed. The fact that somebody says OK. You better make sure it is OK and does, but it is in my opinion an essential point of transfer from one point to another is the communication. And that must never be minimized and so you have comm-- you need communications for civilization to proceed or for relationships to proceed. Now as I talk out loud, and I don't remember whether I had previously or not -- This is also an argument for having a conference with the enemy, if there is an enemy. Communication is essential. The human being is blessed by being able to communicate. Now they are handicapped with the many languages that exist but that gets overcome and you you've got to. This business of 'I'll never talk to him again' is is kind of irresponsible and short-sighted is the word -- short-sighted. Let me say to you, I made very very good friends with Eastern Europe. Europeans. I have no doubt about it. To the point that in the middle of the conference, I had two separate members of the Polish delegation personally, quietly come to me and to say they are afraid for themselves and their families because there were changes beginning in Poland. Lech Walesa was moving in, and they were afraid, and I said to both of them, because I liked them both, They both spoke English and I met with them and I knew they were -- they were more 'me' than they were the Russians, and I told both of them. I said 'If you are in trouble, if you get in trouble, try to get the hell out and I'll help you.' 'Do the same thing.' One of these people said his son was belonging to the youth movement, and incidentally that family ended up in the United States and I did help them here. But they were concerned about this. Let's take another man, a little less human, Raoul Wallenberg. I talked about Raoul Wallenberg among the people I talked to. Everybody I knew that I believed in mentioning names and did a lot, and they began doing the same of mentioning names. The Swedish man toward the end of the preparatory meeting, before the first meeting, knew that I was urging people to mention names when the meeting began and he said to me earlier, 'That's not the way we do things.' And I respected that. The day of the opening he comes over to me and he said, 'I would like you to listen carefully to my minister,' and his minister spoke about Raoul Wallenberg, which he would not have done if we had not established that kind of -- and that again The Helsinki process provided the forum for fundamental changes in civilization and the fact that we took so much care for the Helsinki Process, the fact that we continue to work on the Helsinki Process is I think a symbol really of what America's role should be in the world and that's one reason why I'm always available to help in your work there.

Q: Thank you. You mentioned one thing off camera last time about the general and you exchanging a book in which he wrote an inscription – something you could--

Max: I'll mention this again. You can tell from what I've said that we had a good personal relationship. I knew about his daughter. I knew about his father, I mean, you know, we had a personal relationship and he spoke English fluently. Uh and he was a KGB general. He was in charge of the KGB in Austria before coming to Madrid, so he had some influence, but he had been in the United States also. No after it was all over we kept in touch with each other and uh uh he sent me a book. Apparently, well I told you he was, apparently he knew the fellow who headed the CIA in Austria at the time he was heading the KGB in Austria. And I think it was either Harvard or Yale published a book by both of them on that experience. I have got that book somewhere on my book case. That in itself was an interesting thing. So I didn't know he was writing the book, so he sent me a copy of the book, and he inscribed it: "To my friend, Max Kampelman, who taught me the importance of human rights." And signed his name to it, well a KGB general – you know that's something here, you know-

Q: Beautiful.

Your friend Erika Schlager had a question she wanted me to ask you about Copenhagen in 1990. And the agreements made on human rights, that first international human rights agreement – including a provision regarding the Roma, and she wondered if you had any recollection of those negotiations or if you met with any Roma –

Max: I was not involved in those negotiations, was I, no?

Q: I don't know.

Max: Repeat that again.

Q: She mentions the 1990 Copenhagen document was the first international human rights agreement to make specific note of human rights problems faced by Roma.

Max: Right

Q: Do you remember anything particular about the negotiations on that subject? Did you meet with any Roma while you were in Copenhagen?

Max: Alright, the Copenhagen of course was a different part –

A: Right

Max: – of the process there, and as you know I think that document remains still really the best human – document on that subject. If I – incidentally there is another story about that. This took a great deal of effort and would not have happened – we came out with -- that document is a fantastically good document. It's one of the best that exists in the world on the human dignity and I remember it very well. As a matter of fact, I co-opted names -- professor of Georgetown

Law School, who is now an international judge in Geneva. Why can't I think of his name, I had dinner with him about six months ago- he was here - doesn't matter. What I did when I was unexpectedly asked to go to Copenhagen by Jim Baker if I remember, kind of at the last minute, and I needed a staff because I didn't feel I was that kind of international lawyer - scholar, so I brought him on on board and that was interesting. Now what's coming to me, my friend was there from Russia, Kondrachev - not there as a delegate but as a visitor at the beginning before it opened up, to introduce me to the man who would be in charge of the Russian delegation. And I - 'cause he and I by then were good friends, you know, and he wanted me to meet the Russian and he wanted the Russian to meet me and in my presence, he says to the Russian, if you're ever in doubt as to which way to vote, do what Max is doing, which was a quite interesting. Of course Russia was going through a transformation you see at that point and the fact of the matter is - I'm now thinking out loud - here's how we worked. We had a NATO caucus. I always had NATO caucuses. We had NATO caucus. As you know that document is an outstanding document in the world really, it's an outstanding document. I give a lot of credit to my staff on this because they did a lot of this work. Anyhow, the last day or two, the Russian comes to me - and he said 'We've got a problem.' I said 'What's the problem.' Now you'll have to - I can't remember which one of the Eastern European states, this delegate represented now, but one of the Eastern European states and we now had a good document. The Russians were going with us and all the rest but he didn't have authority to say yes, and that would hold it up because it needed unanimity - so the Russian comes to me because he was handling him - and so I - he came to me and tell me the story and the voting was that afternoon, so we went to see him, the Russian and I, and he explained. He was embarrassed but he didn't have authority, so I remember saying to him, 'I am now speaking to you on behalf of the United States of America and the Soviet Union' or whatever name I used, 'and I'm telling you that if you should ever run into any personal difficulty as a result of this vote we will both come to your assistance.' And I got the Russian to shake his hand, I shook his hand and he voted for it, so we got it through.

Now another interesting story about the process. Of course that - the next I'm about to give was not Helsinki particularly, but I later was asked to negotiate with the Russians on arms and I did negotiate with the Russians on arms, uh oh with them, and uh about four or five months ago George Shultz and Gorbachev sponsored a conference in Rome on Zero Nuclear Missiles. You may know I'm putting in a hell of a lot of time on Zero Nuclear Missiles

Q: Yeah.

And I was invited to the conference. It was an international conference um and uh uh, while I was there, a Russian I know came over to see me. He was on the staff of the Russians and I didn't know he was going to be there - and two questions I asked him. One, 'The fact that you have so many of the people taking care of the hotels,' this was Gorbachev-Shultz, but a lot of them from the Soviet - the Russian foreign office - 'is this their way of saying they want to go to Zero too?' You know. And he said 'Well, you know that Gorbachev wants to go to Zero.' And he says Gorbachev persuade-- we wouldn't be here if our ministry wouldn't be here.' And then he says 'Wait a minute.' We were at the hotel. 'I'll be back.' And he comes back. This was a Russian that that I negotiated with on arms, nuclear arms, and he gives me a present and he gives me a gift, uh um, my name on it the package. I open up the package. I got mixed up with the Copenhagen, but uh and uh, he was one of their negotiators on nuclear arms with me because I

was negotiating nuclear arms at that point. And uh, he said, 'I remember, Max, you introduced me to your daughter-in-law who was in Copenhagen and I remember learning from her that her father had been a Danish diplomat.' This was a meeting we had in Copenhagen. And he said 'You may or may not know I knew, I became our ambassador to Copenhagen, and I saw in the bookstore a book about Danish art, so I remembered your daughter, so I'm bringing this book to bring to your daughter in law as a gift.' Which was interesting, you know, it's that – you know...

Q: Max I appreciate it, this is great.

END OF TAPE