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### Peregrine Rhodes

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This is an interview with Sir Peregrine Rhodes, a former ambassador to Greece and High Commissioner in Cyprus. I am Virginia Crowe and the interview is taking place on 29 August 2003.

VC Perry, first of all your career from start to finish, just give me a brief outline of where you went.

PR Well, first of all I spent three years in the Office having done a new entrants course, which was then abolished. Then I went to Burma, my first post. After that I came back to London to be a private secretary to a minister of state. After that I went to Vienna. After that I went to Finland, Helsinki. Then I came back to the office again and was deputy head of the Northern Department. I went off to Sussex University for a year and a half. Then I was married for the second time and we went to Rome. We were there for three years and then we paid the penalty and came back and went to East Berlin to establish the embassy there. After that I was appointed Chief of the Assessment Staff in the Cabinet Office and from there I went to Cyprus as High Commissioner. My last post was as ambassador in Greece.

VC Where did you go to school?

PR Winchester.

VC Ah, like so many others in the Foreign Office, in that day, in that time I think.

PR Really.

VC I think fewer come from the public schools now than in those days, so they tell me. What made you think of the Office?

PR I was in the army for four years before that, first of all in the war and then just after. Then I went to Oxford, to do my degree.

VC What did you do your degree in?

PR Greats (Ancient History and Philosophy).

VC Very useful, I dare say, when you went to Greece later.

PR Yes, although modern and ancient Greek are not the same language. I looked around for a job and I was offered one in Mars, the confectioners. I wasn't attracted by that. Then I discovered there was the Diplomatic Service, for which you had to pass an exam and so I thought I would try that. As a result, they said that if I got a decent second class degree I could enter the Service. As you probably know from your research, I in fact got a first. I joined the service in 1950.

VC I am interested that they abolished the new entrants course.

PR Yes, I was among those instrumental in getting that abolished. It was a terrible waste of money and time.

VC Ah, tell us about that.

PR Well, the aim was to learn about your own country before you went abroad to represent it. You did all sorts of things. For example, you went down a coal mine, you went round old peoples' homes. At the old peoples' homes, we were introduced as foreign students. I thought that perhaps the thing wasn't quite working. And we went to a factory, Wills, the cigarette makers. They were all in the Newcastle area. We were expected to write a report. I wrote a report, and I think we all said the same thing - abolish it. Mrs Atkins was the name of the lady who ran it all then. She was the training officer, a nice lady. William Strang was then the Permanent Under Secretary.

VC Yes, any views on William Strang as you started as a new entrant, did he feel like God personified?

PR Well, not really. I never thought anyone was God personified but he was certainly

intending to exude awe. I don't know whether he succeeded, but he told us that we were going to go on this course. It was the first time they had ever had a course of that sort.

VC So you went into the Office, and what was your first job?

PR Middle East; Syria, Iraq and the Lebanon.

VC And that didn't become a speciality, did it?

PR No, it didn't. Then of course I got involved a little bit with the Arab Israel dispute but I didn't really know much about it, except that of course I had been in Palestine in the army so I had an idea what it was like there.

VC Did you have any language training at that stage?

PR No.

VC And did you later have language training?

PR Yes. German and Greek. Modern Greek is of course different from ancient Greek, but they help each other.

VC But that was much later on, wasn't it?

PR Yes it was. But earlier I did some Italian before going to Rome. We did that in Florence. My wife and I both went together to stay with a family.

VC Very nice.

PR Yes, it could have been worse.

VC I have been thinking about those early days when you started, was it the third room?

PR Yes, shall I tell you a little bit about the third room?

VC Yes, tell us a bit, please.

PR The third room was quite different from anything you can think about now. First of all there were fires and the good porter came in a tail coat and stoked the fires...

VC Tail coat, they wore tail coats?

PR Yes.

VC And this was in 1953?

PR In 1950. Yes, we used them to toast bread. They brought us tea and we all had a cup of tea. That was the time during the period of training and working when you actually met the head of the department. You wouldn't meet him much otherwise, because there was an assistant and you submitted your work to the assistant.

VC What kind of work were you doing at that early stage? Knowing a bit about the area from a different source...

PR There were three of us in the room; both of the others have now died, I'm afraid. They were doing the various countries of the Middle East. I dealt with anything that related to these three countries – Syria, Iraq and the Lebanon.

VC When you say 'dealt with', what sort of thing...

PR The papers came on to my desk in the form of either a telegram or a letter, something like that, and I had to decide what to do.

VC I see.

PR Either put it away, or send it to a sensible place, or write a draft reply.

VC And then it went up through the system.

PR If necessary, yes it did. But you don't want stories about that sort of thing?

VC Oh yes, tell us.

PR When I was dealing with the Arab Israel dispute, papers were coming in but we were getting ready for a major initiative. The Head of Department was sending out letters asking for information from various institutions, embassies, etc.

VC ...you mean UK, or around the world?

PR Wherever seemed appropriate. We had an embassy in Tel Aviv, that would be one place. We seemed to have miles of files, but I thought I had better go on and do this so I went on doing it and I initialled drafts off. In those days once you had written a draft, if a diplomatic member of the Service, that would be me you see, not a junior, initialled it off, it was then immediately typed and signed by whoever it was supposed to be signed by, in this case by the Head of Department. After about five weeks he realised that he had signed rather a lot of letters and didn't know why, so he summoned the file, summoned me and that was a disaster.

VC The disaster being that you had signed it and he hadn't.

PR No, no. The disaster being that I had approved the letters without authority and he had then had to sign them. And he had signed them without really looking at them. Then came the moment when he realised he had signed too many, and we had already got most of the information for which he was asking.

VC Yes, yes, it just went on for too long.

PR No harm was done, I can say that, but it was just that I was much too nervous to approach him about this and the assistant, I think, was new so I just did it.

VC The two other people in the third room with you, they were longer standing and...

PR Had been there a bit longer, Derek Brinson, Harry Dudgeon, they had been there longer. Harry had a very bad car crash in Jordan, Derek got cancer.

VC Did you find that you were well able to keep up with your contemporaries or was there an attitude of competition or co-operation? It is always referred to as a very good way of learning isn't it?

PR Yes. On the whole there was co-operation. We went in with our bowler hats and our umbrellas. We were a little pompous; they were rather more pompous than I was, they weren't talking a great deal to me, they felt it beneath them and so I had to be rather careful.

VC So you actually had to win your spurs in a way?

PR Well, I suppose it could be described in that way but it wasn't quite like that because there were no spurs to be won. It was quite difficult to do anything that they would approve.

VC Why did they send you to Rangoon? Did you ask for it?

PR No. There again there is a story. I went on leave after about two years in the Office and came back to find a letter from Personnel Department saying you have been posted to Jakarta. The ambassador is accepting you but you must go by yourself, not with your wife or family because there is no accommodation. My wife was expecting our first child and this was rather a shock. So I marched in to Donald Tebbit, the desk officer for the area. They changed it around and I didn't go anywhere until the baby was born and then went to Rangoon.

VC And how did you feel about going to Rangoon?

PR Oh, rather excited about it. It was rather an interesting place to go. Not many people went to Rangoon.

VC And what about the training they gave you for it, anything?

PR No. No training. I think we just went. It took quite a long time to get there because we had to go by boat.

VC In those days. And a small embassy?

PR Yes. Paul Gore-Booth was the ambassador. He had been there a very short time. It wasn't that small; in those days things were bigger because there were more people, I don't think it was large but it seemed important.

VC What was the nature of the work you were doing, can you remember what the crises, the big issues were?

PR Well, one of the big issues, what you might call the big issue, was that we had a defence agreement with the Burmese. You wouldn't expect that because, after all, they didn't even join the Commonwealth, as you probably know, when they became independent. So the first serious thing I had to do, was to go along with the ambassador and the counsellor to a meeting with the Burmese to decide what to do about this. Obviously it couldn't stay as it was. Times had changed even in those days, so we had a meeting from which it became clear that really the Burmese only wanted to end the agreement provided that they still retained the right to buy weapons at a cheap rate and have training for their forces. So we started on that and I came back and wrote the record. That surprised the ambassador and the counsellor because actually I did it quite accurately.

VC They were not used to that?

PR Apparently not. I don't know; but this was very early days.

VC But it seems to suggest that maybe they were not used in the past to people writing accurate accounts.

PR Well, I think it depended on the individual.

VC So that was one of the big issues...

PR That was one of the big issues, the other big issue was creating some sort of relationship with the Burmese which would work after their independence, and Paul Gore-Booth did a brilliant job on that, he spoke on the Burmese radio in Burmese.

VC And he was a very distinguished man, wasn't he, it is interesting...

PR Yes, I got to know him quite well. He wrote a play.

VC In Burma?

PR Yes. My then wife and I and some others, produced it. He was a greatly talented man, a Christian Scientist, you probably know. It was quite difficult to get alongside the Burmese but if you had nothing to do with the colonial regime (and I hadn't of course), you were quite all right, you got on rather well. If you had you didn't get on at all well. We had something called the Colombo Plan, which was training for various professionals, e.g. doctors or skilled designers or builders, and of course the trouble, which is now repeating itself exactly, was that the doctors and people who were trained didn't come back. They had better jobs somewhere else.

VC There was a question at the time wasn't there of Kuomintang troops in Burma, was that something that caused you difficulties?

PR Yes, the KMT, they weren't in Rangoon, no, but they had been and there were of course what were called terrorists. There were tribal gangs of other rebels, the Karens for example.

The thing to do if you wanted to travel around Burma was not to get an escort. If you had an escort you were attacked because the bandits wanted the weapons the escort had. What you did was you put in an application to the foreign ministry. You then went on your trip and came back and found the refusal waiting for you. That is exactly how it was.

VC How were the Brits regarded generally amongst the colleagues.

PR Amongst the colleagues? It's Burma we are talking about? Oh, quite well really. I didn't have much to do with them. I was too junior you see. What I did do was go round with the ambassador when we went travelling. In those days the air attaché had an aeroplane and we flew hither and thither. One day we got over the jungle and one engine faltered and was going to stop. The pilot, the air attaché, fiddled around a bit and got it going again and said, 'I forgot to change the fuel tanks.'

VC Very encouraging

PR That's another true story.

VC Very professional. So when you left what sort of feelings did you leave, were you pleased to be going?

PR Sad to leave. I rather liked it and so did my wife. We liked the Burmese, the sort of thing you find difficult to understand now. We would invite quite a lot of these people back to the house, we had a cook, plus several servants, but the cook could produce any amount of rice and food, and then you invited perhaps ten people and about twenty came. It was the exact opposite to what you thought, "they won't like the British, they won't come", but it wasn't like that at all. Provided they thought you could be trusted and also that you didn't have any colonial past.

VC Just a word about entertainment, generally throughout your career, it's a much misunderstood diplomatic tool. I wonder if you'd like to comment on the usefulness of diplomatic entertaining at home? Both at a junior level and when you become more senior.

PR ...It's always useful, I feel. I don't take the view that is so easily taken, that it's a chore and wives don't want to do it; they want to be paid to do it. That is nonsense. But I'm out of date. I think I've always got value out of it. You choose your people to invite of course with some care, if you don't then of course it is useless, if you don't try and give them a good time it is useless. All sorts of things like that really matter.

VC Did you have a visiting Parliamentary delegation when you were there?

PR Yes, I took a delegation up to Chouk which is where the Burma Oil Company was centred.

VC You yourself alone as a junior diplomat?

PR With them, yes.

VC With the ambassador or just you?

PR No, just me. We went up to Chouk of course, in one of their aeroplanes. The first thing we did was some Scottish dancing. The Burma Oil Company (mainly Scots) were based in Glasgow, they had all been trained to do this, and we did too. It was great fun. We had a very good time there. It was worth doing.

VC Do you think the Parliamentarians got a lot out of it?

PR Well, you are asking me about the first post I was in, it is a little bit unfair. I think I'd like to take other examples on value...

VC ...perhaps we can come back to that later on as a general subject. But Perry, you were a great success in Burma, weren't you. You came back to a rather plum job as private secretary...

PR ...Private secretary to a minister of state, Lord Reading...

VC it was Lord Reading was it, I thought it was Harold Macmillan.

PR No, no. Lord Reading, followed by David Ormsby-Gore. So I had service in the House of Lords and the House of Commons.

VC And was it do you think a reflection of your success in Burma that you got that particular job?

PR I think that I had escorted the ambassador around and got on all right with the Burmese. For example, we went off to Sandaway; there is a lovely beach up there, we flew up there because Hubert Rance, the last Governor, was invited. It's a good example of the way things happen. He was invited by U Nu, the prime minister, and all our colleagues were very envious. They said, "look at the British, they have got it right again. The Russians come in first, then the British bring their last governor of all people". Well, U Nu had done it, we hadn't done anything at all. We did go round when we played games on the beach and so I think perhaps I got on well enough in that to make them think I would be a useful accompanist, I wouldn't put it any higher, I really wouldn't. But I think the private secretary job to a junior minister is not a very grand thing. I didn't enjoy it all that much.

VC And the view of the centre, as keeps being talked about now about Iraq. Did you have a view of the centre and how the centre of government worked in those jobs?

PR Do you mean the centre of government in the country?

VC Yes.

PR Of the Burmese?

VC No, I meant when you came back to your private secretary job.

PR Yes, it was mixed. There were difficult years. Selwyn Lloyd was the Foreign Secretary and I had the job of trying to get an audience for Lord Reading to see the Secretary of State. This was the time of Suez. This is why I was flown back. I remember that we stopped at Beirut then we flew on, we got home at about three in the morning, but that was quite usual in those days. My wife went home by way of the Cape...

VC I was just going to say what happened to the wife and family...

PR The wife and family went home by sea via the Cape. So I was required immediately to go to the office because Donald Maitland, my predecessor in this job, was going off somewhere else and I was required there. I didn't know what on earth I was doing as private secretary, it was quite new to me. But basically the job consisted of making sure that your minister was happy, got what he needed, saw the people he ought to see, that was basically it. And occasionally you drafted something, I insisted on doing that to keep in practice.

VC But you were able to insist on this as a rather junior official as in your remit, as it were.

PR Yes. I think so. When I say I insisted I mean I actually did it and then said there you are. Then they said that's not much good or whatever it was. You mustn't think that I'm being proud about it, I'm not, but this was a pretty boring job if I didn't do some of the work. I got to know something about the subject by the time I left.

VC The subject, any subject or a series...

PR Any subject would be the same, yes, and when the papers came in, e.g. what to do with the unwanted babies created by the American servicemen during the war... all this sort of thing. Sometimes I would put a note on the papers making a recommendation.

VC And yet this great crisis Suez was going on.

PR Ah yes, the Suez thing was of course very big. When I got into the Office after the flight from Burma we had come to the point where we were about to invade and there was going to

be an announcement so I was given a copy of the announcement to give to my minister. I handed it to Lord Reading who read through it and said, 'Dynamite.' He then had to defend the document in the House of Lords. In preparation he summoned Archie Ross.

VC Who is Archie Ross?

PR He was an Assistant Secretary. He briefed Lord Reading who then went to the House of Lords and made the case for what we were doing. I thought he did it rather well considering the fact that there was nothing much to say. But, there we were, and then the war came.

VC A tough job at that time, I mean it must have meant working very long hours.

PR Yes. But not doing anything very sensible, not I, the minister was pretty busy. I sometimes had to go to his home to take papers and that sort of thing. It wasn't very far.

VC And what kind of a chap was he, Lord Reading?

PR Lord Reading was charming. Very nice, but of course he was kept on the outer fringe and I didn't get him in to Selwyn Lloyd this time. I didn't see much of Selwyn Lloyd really. He thought the House of Commons was just a house of apes. He said so.

VC Not what you might call diplomatic.

PR No, no. Nothing like that. He was a clever lawyer but I don't think he was much good in that job.

VC So, Perry, what was the essential difference between working for a minister in the Lords and a minister in the Commons? It might not be the obvious. Was David Ormsby-Gore an influential minister?

PR Yes he was. David Ormsby-Gore was very quick, bright and he had a low boiling point.

VC Is that a good thing or a bad thing to have a low boiling point...

PR It depended. He was sometimes quite rude to senior officials.

VC I dimly recall that.

PR But a charming wife. We had amusing times with him and British European Airways going to Geneva. We got a bit late. It was terribly difficult getting David Gore to leave his flat. I used to go and pick him up and take him on to the airport, and sometimes I couldn't get him out of the flat. On one occasion we arrived exactly as the aircraft was about to taxi off, and I, in a moment of fury, said (to myself really, not to anybody else), "this minister has got to go to the disarmament talks in Geneva and they won't hold the aircraft". Apparently a correspondent from the Evening Standard heard me. We were on the front page of the Standard next day.

VC Did you find that David Ormsby-Gore was more influential than Lord Reading, was the job more interesting?

PR Oh yes. Certainly. He was in the Commons as a star, in those days that was very important. And much quicker.

VC And did he have good access to the Foreign Secretary?

PR Yes.

VC You didn't have to negotiate?

PR That wasn't difficult at all.

VC And what do you remember primarily about that time as a private secretary, what sticks out. I mean, it could be the subject; Suez, as might be suggested. It might be Suez, but it might also be the stress and strain, or the interest of being in the centre.

PR I think the stress and the strain of the interest was the main impression. You're right about that. Extraordinary things happened, one of them being flying back in fog from Geneva, David due to speak in a debate in the House of Commons. As we gradually realised he wasn't going to make it, we landed in Manchester instead of London. And he was fairly furious about that but it wasn't anyone's fault but the weather.

VC So he didn't take it out on you...

PR Oh no, he didn't try that. There is a story about him which is quite funny. My successor was a splendid chap. When it was cold, he didn't feel cold, he had something wrong with him, but he was a very good operator. When they were in Washington David used to have a selection of telegrams sent to him daily, so as to keep up. One week the selection was, nothing to do with him, completely wrong. He turned round to David and said, 'Why do you think they did that?' My successor said, 'Probably to annoy you.' He told me that so I am sure it is true.

VC And how did that go down?

PR Oh, I think it shut the minister up.

VC It was an effective tactic.

PR It was clever. I wouldn't have had the courage, but there you are.

VC You wouldn't have had the courage? Now that is very interesting because it reflects on a relationship between private secretary and ministers, I wonder...

PR ...I actually knew David quite well. But superficially. There were moments when, for example, I went to his flat. It was late and his wife would say, 'Do have a drink and stay and have a little supper, or something.' David would immediately veto that. That was his attitude. That kind of Tory at that time was like that, though not of course all Tories.

VC I was going to say has it changed, in your observation?

PR I was going to say it has changed a great deal. Now it is christian names and very informal. I used to call him 'minister', I don't think I would now...

VC I think you'd still call him 'minister'...

PR Do you think so? Well, in front of somebody else perhaps, but anyway it is now much more informal and much better.

VC That is what I was going to ask you. Do you think it is better when it is less formal?

PR Oh yes.

VC So the formality was actually rather a barrier?

PR Yes, could be. He didn't want to get too close. Not that I wasn't working closely with him. After all, I was his servant.

VC So it came to an end. How did the time end, was it just the end of three years? Was there any reason for moving on?

PR Three years. Yes, I suppose it was about three years. John Henniker Major, Head of the Personnel Department, suggested to me that now was the time to move. He wanted to know whether I preferred New York or Vienna. I chose Vienna.

VC And did you say that because Vienna is Vienna, or because of the content of the work?

PR Oh, because Vienna is Vienna. I thought the music would be a bonus.

VC Well, I hope you weren't disappointed.

PR Not a bit. We went to the opera every week. And we could afford it.

VC Where was the embassy at that stage?

PR Reisner Strasse.

VC You didn't live in Mezinger Strasse, that must've been there?

PR That was the street on which the Ambassador's house was.

VC The time in Austria. Difficult time, 1959 to 1962, wasn't that when Kreisky was foreign minister, when was the treaty with the Russians about Austria...

PR Austria. The Treaty was already fixed. In 1955 it was all relatively normal.

VC What was your primary role in the embassy?

PR I was the information officer. But actually my primary role in that capacity, was giving trusted British journalists, access to dispatches and reports from our missions in Eastern Europe where the Communists were in action. We were also giving material of that kind to the Swiss and Austrians who were writing it up in their newspapers.

VC Good job?

PR Yes, that was quite interesting that bit of it, it landed me in trouble sooner or later because I gave them something rather hot and they reported it. There were questions in the House of Lords, "travellers tales" was the cover we used. We had access to a lot of Austrians, mainly journalists, who were very pleased to talk, hoping that they might get something.

VC President Kennedy's visit, did that make any impact?

PR Oh yes, 1961. You are quite right to ask that. I had a flat with a balcony which looked at the Russian embassy, Kennedy going to talk to Khrushchev, and we saw that with some journalists. In those days that was a terrific thing, of course we didn't really know what was going on at the time, we had to go to the Americans for that.

VC One of the purposes of Khrushchev going there I believe was to try and get the UN established in Vienna rather than in New York. Did that cross your path?

PR No, it didn't. You are now telling me things...

VC Kreisky, you knew Kreisky did you?

PR Yes. Because I knew his private secretary. I made a point of knowing his private secretary.

VC The private secretary network, a very powerful one.

PR It worked and he was rather good. Someone called Blechner. I am still in touch with. He was a great help to me. Otherwise I knew a lot of journalists, Austrian and British journalists. He was an agent, a so-called agent for Austria,

VC When you think of Austria in the 1960s, but in the 1950s particularly, as the great centre of espionage, that may not be a subject you remember.

PR No, I can certainly go into that but you see it was dying out, for the more people had access to eastern Europe the less they needed to spy from Vienna.

VC I see.

PR So that you have got people who go in; at least they thought there wasn't much evidence of what you would call spying.

VC What were the conditions like?

PR Very good.

VC No prohibitions?

PR No.

VC And did you find it a dark, gloomy city?

PR Not a bit. No. For a bottle of whisky we could book opera tickets. I had a staff, you see, as press officer I had a staff of four and one of them was a great expert on all that. He arranged it for me.

VC And who was your ambassador?

PR Jim Bowker, Sir James Bowker, his wife was called Elsa, she was an Egyptian.

VC I have heard that at that time the British were particularly well regarded in Austria. Did you find that?

PR No, I wouldn't say that we were marvellously well regarded because one of the things that the Austrians wanted to do was join the European Community.

VC They were applying at that time, weren't they?

PR Yes, and we were not. We had formed the EFTA and one of the things I had to do was to plug that organisation. It wasn't a good pitch; on the other hand I knew the journalists pretty well. We could discuss the question.

VC Purely political, nothing personal. So what do you chiefly remember about that time?

PR Well, two things really. One being what I have described to you as the business of giving information to the journalists, the other being making contacts and learning how to make the best use of my contacts.

VC You were just saying that if you had been thinking seriously about career prospects you might have thought of New York.

PR It was a much bigger information section there of which I would have been in charge.

VC Were you going to be information whatever happened. Was that how the career went?

PR Well, I think at that stage I was supposed to be going to do that next. I have never been a great specialist.

VC But it was a good experience in Austria, is what you are saying?

PR Oh yes.

VC And you wouldn't have missed it. And then you came back and you went abroad again and it was a rather demanding job; Helsinki.

PR Yes, that's right. Con O'Neill was the Ambassador.

VC A frozen country again. Did you enjoy it?

PR Terrible contrast. The thing about the Austrians is that they tell you what they think you want to hear and then don't do it. You know that as well as I do, but the Finns tell you the truth and do it. The contrast is very great. In Austria you get quite a lot of wine, in Finland you get a lot of spirits.

VC Both of those things that you have described throw some light on the kind of qualities

you have got to have as a rising diplomat. Would you like to characterise that?

PR The wine thing. I used to have a separate bottle, not whisky at all, not even beer, well, the chap I was talking to was drinking whisky. Until he had drunk about half a bottle of whisky he wasn't terribly informative. That's the truth. He became quite a friend. He was the permanent secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and I knew him quite well. He knew the British Council representative who introduced us and then I used to invite him and he came and talked a great deal about Finland.

VC Interesting that the British Council had such a crucial role in Finland.

PR It was quite an interesting role. The Council taught English and that was important for the Finns who felt rather isolated.

VC My impression is that the British Council had a particularly high profile, higher in Finland than in other countries.

PR It was quite a high role. Peter Davies was the name of the representative and they did a lot of teaching in the various paper mills, the timber mills. Almost every one of these had a British Council teacher teaching English.

VC Yes, what do you remember about your time there as a representative of a major country?

PR I think the charm of the people is probably quite high. That was my first introduction in a definite way to the Soviet influence in the world. Of course they were sort of lowering over Finland.

VC And was your business concerned with the Russians?

PR No, not directly. I was Head of Chancery, but Con O'Neill was the political expert. My business was largely connected with making sure Con O'Neill was well briefed and happy.

We were the principal Western trader and we had a lot of connections with the Finns, the Finns trusted us. They were very friendly and hospitable. They drank a lot. Their views on the Russians were of particular interest to us.

VC What were you dealing with as subjects? It was the time of the Cuban missile crisis which must have been an issue.

PR We didn't know much about that really. I remember it, yes.

VC So you weren't a listening post? It's one of the things often said about Helsinki, isn't it, that it was a listening post?

PR I don't really think to any great extent. The thing that was annoying was that I wasn't allowed to go to the Soviet Union next door because I was supposed to have been too fully briefed.

VC You also, didn't you, had a visit from Macmillan.

PR Oh yes, we had a series of splendid visits. We had to coincide Heath coming from Russia, Macmillan, the Prime Minister from London. He was questioned about his troubles with the Profumo Affair. He held a press conference, he was asked about that by a Swedish journalist to whom he replied, 'You, with your experience, ought to know.'

PR I thought that was a good response. I heard it because I was sort of in charge of the arrangements. It's what Heads of Chancery do. That was the place where we had only one embassy lorry or car. We drove in it from the airport holding on to the secret boxes. I got used to all that sort of thing.

VC Were there any repercussions from that? And since we are talking about repercussions, etc, you were Head of Chancery. Now a Head of Chancery is a manager and has personnel responsibilities.

PR Exactly, he presents the embassy to the ambassador working, so I was four times Head of Chancery.

VC Four times, you must have been terribly good at it, if not in the beginning by the end.

PR No, I wasn't at all any good at it. No, no, that doesn't follow at all.

VC Were there disciplinary problems, both in that and other places? Did you find any trend or discontent or whatever. From that vantage point you see things that you don't see in other places.

PR I should think wives were rather bored because they could not get around very easily.

VC In Finland?

PR Yes...

VC Everywhere else?

PR Also in other places. In Rome they were frightened of driving in the traffic. I got one or two people coming to see me, I remember, in Rome when I was Head of Chancery again and after they told me all their troubles I said, 'Well, the Persian Gulf is a good place, you should consider a posting there.

VC The Gulf?

PR People queuing up to go there. But that has gone now. It's so long ago but I do remember that and in Finland it wasn't like that. I would happily have been ambassador at Helsinki.

VC Was Finland a popular post?

PR I suppose it was, really. For quite a lot of people, yes. Have you ever met Justin Staples?

VC No

PR He was ambassador there. He, now I suppose that must be ten years ago, oh yes, I think it was popular because the Finns were so friendly.

VC But how did you judge it? A good posting, a bad posting? How did you regard it?

PR Not a bad posting. It wasn't a bad posting mainly because Con O'Neill was the ambassador. It was good to work for him.

VC And what were his particular skills and virtues, do you think?

PR His skills were really logical thinking and drafting. Afterwards, of course, he went to be our representative to the European Union (it wasn't the Union then).

VC And he showed the talents that he displayed so well there, as Ambassador in Finland, did he?

PR Oh yes, I think so, he was also a good fisherman, he used to give dinner parties to eat his catch from Norway.

VC And the Finns are very fond of fish, aren't they?

PR Yes, it all went very well. He married a Finn, his third wife.

VC Death of Kennedy. You said you were there in Finland when he died.

PR Yes.

VC Did it make great waves, in Finland?

PR Yes it did, for the Finns because they relied on the Americans as a balance against the Russians, and of course he had said some very outstanding things.

VC So, how did you move from Finland, then. At your request or was it...?

PR No, no. I never asked to be moved, I think that is probably true. But no, they said, 'Now you must come to be assistant head of Northern Department' dealing with Russia and Eastern Europe.

VC This was the classic career move, was it?

PR I suppose it might have been, I don't really know, but I think so, yes. I didn't think it was a marvellous job. I had the East European section, not the Russian. It was divided in those days.

VC I was remembering that and remembering that you had just said you had your contacts with Eastern Europe.

PR You had a quite close connection, of course, at this time. As I said to Brian (Crowe), yes, he worked with me to some extent. We got on rather well. He was very good, jolly nice, and did very well. He is one of the very few people who has ever said to me after I have mucked about with a draft that it was improved.

VC Modest as ever. But there seems to have been a great coherence between your experiences in Austria dealing with these two Europes and is that common or uncommon?

PR Quite uncommon. I don't know that I even realised it but the business over Eastern Europe at this time was quite important because you did require information about it, I wouldn't say knowledge exactly, but information about the way the Russians operated on their own kind.

VC A sort of background, I suppose.

PR Yes it was, and what I learned tinged my attitude for quite a long time.

VC And doubtless it was very useful in your job in getting the results you needed, I suppose?

PR Yes, it was, certainly when I came to be Chief of the Assessments Staff.

VC Yes, it's running on a bit but I wanted to ask you about that. We'll go back, but while we are on this, the Chief of the Assessments Staff, would you care to comment on the difference between being Chief of the Assessments Staff and the Head of JIC? I think that it is often confused.

PR The Chief of the Assessments staff is in charge of the staff who prepare the material to go before the JIC. We produced the red book which summarised the situation. Each area had a chap doing it. David Wilson, later governor of Hong Kong did China. You were talking about discipline. One of the things I suppose that I was proud of, was having kept David Wilson in the Service.

VC Tell us about that.

PR He's in Scotland, but never mind, he was talking about leaving, you see. Because he went out to run the China Quarterly, when he came back he was given a junior post as assistant Head of Department. I moved heaven and earth to get him because he was far cleverer, and better informed on China than anyone else.

VC But, to take us back to Northern Department, how did it rate in your postings and in the importance of what you did, this takes me to the question of whether you think that it was more useful, important, enjoyable, contrasting being abroad than being in the Office. Northern Department was an important department.

PR Well, I think from some points of view the Office is much more important and much more interesting because you see much more of what is going on. You have some influence sometimes and I found that interesting. On the other hand, of course, it's fairly rough. The salary was there but nothing else was provided.

VC Long hours?

PR Yes, long hours sometimes. Northern Department wasn't a very satisfactory posting for me. We had to go to parties given by the East Europeans and we went round and round Whitehall ending up with a glass of tomato juice. It wasn't much fun. The representatives in London were not particularly forthcoming, as you would expect. As you will have gathered from the way we have been talking I have been in personal touch and I think that people who don't do that lose important experience.

VC Not the paper pushers.

PR No, London of course is much more important and there are certain people who do very well there.

VC Well, difficult to believe that many people are better at what you have done, but you went on from this job, immediately, to become a paper pusher, in Sussex, didn't you? Doing an academic job.

PR Yes, that's right. But that coincided with my divorce.

VC I see. So you stepped out of things.

PR Well, I had to get out. They were very kind and they found me a very nice post, namely Rome.

VC Absolutely. At least it seems to be. It was the time wasn't it, when the Brits were

negotiating for entry to the European Community. Was that one of the major things you were concerned with?

PR Yes, but the Italians didn't think we had to push that at all. They wanted us in. They still are of course, very pro-European. I got a ruin of a house there which we reconstructed.

VC I can't imagine how you keep up with these three houses.

PR Nor can I. But we do it somehow.

VC So that was a happy time and a successful time with the negotiations.

PR The first post that I went to with my new wife. Therefore it was going to be and it was.

VC And what were your main responsibilities?

PR I was Counsellor and Head of Chancery. We had visits by ministers, we kept up with the Italians, but the Italians didn't have problems. I remember having to brief colleagues after a visit by the Prime Minister and I started by saying that I was afraid we didn't have any problems. They were just laughing, but it was true.

VC And the issues that you were dealing with?

PR Our access to the European Union and military affairs. Co-operation but I didn't do much really, I helped

VC So contacts were important, so entertaining was important.

PR Yes, we had found a very good house.

VC And that was really an effective tool, was it?

PR Yes. The Italians came because it was in the right place in Vecchia Roma. That's another aspect. The embassy in Rome is exactly that. In my world, you see, the word embassy applies to the ambassador's house. The office is the chancery.

VC So, it sounds blissful and interesting. So you had to pay for it in the next posting.

PR Yes that's right. East Germany.

VC Did they ask you or did they tell you?

PR They told me. They said you are just the chap. I had been to see the personnel department. There was a circular that said go and see them when you are in London so I went and did it, stupidly. And said I am quite happy in Rome, I don't wish to move away. The next thing I heard was "you are going to East Berlin".

VC They saw your face and they remembered you.

PR I'm afraid I spoke German, which is another thing you see. We could travel around the country in our car which had red number plates, they all did as diplomats, so of course everyone knew where you were. The problem was that in this country they didn't have anything like that and of course you didn't know what they were doing.

VC But did that mean you could explore and go to places like Weimar.

PR We went to Weimar.

VC I can see that would alleviate the gloom quite a bit.

PR Oh yes. We did and we booked hotels and things. We had a spook, you could say, in the embassy who was Admin or something and of course we did it all through him. He even booked us skiing, down on the Czechoslovak border. We went there and that was where Margaret was asked by the maid if some day they could have her hat.

VC Charming.

PR It was.

VC Knowing Margaret she probably gave it to her.

PR Yes. All that added spice, spice of the best sort, not the wrong sort.

VC And then you go back to London in 1975. Not a very dramatic time, not a lot going on there.

PR Not in London, not in Europe so much.

VC Our British entry.

PR That all the time. It was mainly other countries, other business. You are talking about the assessment staff. Yes, well that was really looking at threatening areas.

VC Interesting?

PR Yes it was. I felt rather ignorant.

VC In the course of this some of your talents had obviously become clear, the people to people thing, assessment staff might not be like that.

PR No, there wasn't much of that. Though you see in those days the chairman of the JIC was a Foreign Office deputy secretary. Now, the chap who has been doing all this talking on the box is a former head of MI6, which would never have happened in my day. That's one of the things I meant when I said before, things have changed.

VC Two things strike me. First that I wanted to ask you about this period. One was how

was it coming back to London, and I suppose I want to talk about the contrast in living between abroad and at home. And then the other thing that struck me was we talked a bit about how important it is to be at home if you want to influence policy, but I wonder how it felt influencing policy from East Germany.

PR You didn't.

VC You didn't at all?

PR Not really. I think there were occasions when people made suggestions of something they might do when they come to East Berlin and look at something or do something, but no, I don't think so. We were really reporting on what the East Germans were doing.

VC Yes, so it was that way.

PR I would say that. There was an occasion actually, you talked about parliamentary delegations, well there was a moment when a parliamentary delegation came to East Berlin. I was in charge at the time, they said that they knew that we had had an embassy here and it was in an awful state, and they thought that we ought to be building on that site now. So I said of course, I must show you where it is. So we put them into cars took them round and the site of the embassy was in the middle of a mine-field. I told them that it would be there. If they thought we could put an embassy there I was afraid that I didn't. I never heard another word about that.

VC Well, it shows the importance of siting.

PR It does actually, I don't know how they got this information because I certainly hadn't sent it to London.

VC And actually you were succeeded by Curtis Keeble.

PR Yes. Well, I wasn't succeeded by Curtis Keeble. He was the Ambassador. I was still

there when he came. I was his deputy.

VC Was that difficult, adjusting to that?

PR It was a good idea to go. Especially when he started writing despatches saying things I had said a year ago. That sort of thing is bound to happen. He was charming actually, we are still in touch with him.

VC Going back to England again, I suppose what I am getting at is the disruptions of life. Was your house let and did you get your house back?

PR I hadn't got a house.

VC So you had to find something?

PR Yes, we did. We found a flat.

VC An era when property prices had gone up a great deal.

PR Yes, they had. We had that tiny flat which we have got now. I had one major advantage, Margaret of course was enormously flexible, she didn't worry.

VC So it wasn't a hardship.

PR No.

VC Again, reflections on pay and allowances, anything you want to comment on there?

PR Well, I think at that stage they were rather unreasonably low. I think that is true, when we came back certainly we were not very well off. But I'm not sure that I joined the Diplomatic Service to be well off. That's important I think.

VC So the rewards of the Diplomatic Service are not going to be financial.

PR Never financial. They are going to be the life, the variety, the amusement, the entertainment, that's the wrong word but you know what I mean.

VC The enjoyment, perhaps?

PR The enjoyment, yes that's right. And meeting lots of interesting people and doing things you wouldn't otherwise be able to, all those sorts of things.

VC Would you do it again?

PR Oh yes.

VC One of the things I wanted to talk about, and it may be more relevant to your later jobs, the question of status when you are abroad. You are someone rather special, especially if you are very senior, and I wonder if it is a strain to come back and find yourself utterly not special?

PR I don't think it was for me, but I think it is for quite a lot of people. I think you are right, I'm afraid. I don't want to be nasty at all about this, but it certainly is difficult. I get that impression sometimes when I talk. Sometimes it is of course that wives are more susceptible to this than husbands, because they have been isolated and for all sorts of reasons. I think this is true though in this country nobody gives a damn. I remember when we first came here which was now twenty years ago I wondered what on earth I was to do since I had this K, was I supposed to bother about it or not. I thought no, not really, but then I thought it is going to be awkward for somebody when they discover so I had better do something. I consulted Clive Rose and he told me to get some paper printed with your title. He had had to do it. And it worked all right and I don't make any fuss at all.

VC That rather than the personal adjustment?

PR The personal adjustment, I don't know. I don't usually tell anyone what I did or anything about it unless they ask me very persistently. Then if he says what did you do, I say well, I was an ambassador. Oh! he says, and the conversation usually ends then because he doesn't know what to say next. And I don't either.

VC One thing though I think people suffer from is the kind of life that they lead abroad, the friends you make are often made, if you are very senior, because of your rank.

PR Because of what you are and where you are. That's right.

VC And so there are boat trips and shooting trips, things like that, it's a different milieu.

PR Yes it is. That was the thing by which I always reckoned that I would judge people, whether they were friends or not, by whether they continued being friends after you had ceased to have this post. I think they judged me that way too. I think this is right. Because we just float away, we are just holders of an office for a time.

VC And the good diplomats, would you say, are those who have the attitude you are outlining?

PR I would say that every time. Even of the most senior ones I would say that. They were much easier to treat as friends. I can tell what sort of attitude they are going to take, even if I ring them up it comes across sometimes. We have good friends, they are the ones who don't bother about anything like that, but you may have to bother. If you get an invitation from Buckingham Palace you go and you are who you are. You can't just say, "well, I'm not." That happens very seldom now, but it used to come rather more often. Have I said too much?

VC No, no. I wanted to lead you down that path.

PR I hope I've said what I think.

VC ...yes, that's what I am after. And my question does touch on the strengths and weaknesses of British diplomacy.

PR Yes, I think in general I would have to say that British diplomats do better than most others. I think that is because they are better briefed, because they are more conscientious and because they write better.

VC And the others that are nearly as good?

PR Americans, probably.

VC Really? Given their system of not letting them get to the very top?

PR Yes, well, it depends very much. I had a very close American colleague in Greece and we are still in touch with him. He really knew what he was doing and he minded. Perhaps he was the exception. Perhaps I am judging by one person, and that is a dangerous thing to do, but I have met some pretty good Americans. And they are not all right at the top. Of the others, I used to think I was going to say the French...

VC Yes, that's what I was expecting you to say...

PR ...you were expecting that I'm sure, I don't think I would say that too easily now because I think they are suffering from what we were discussing before, they don't manage to get out of it. They don't manage to let themselves go.

VC They become institutionalised really, a very rare kind of institution.

PR I think it must be much harder for them when they retire in the structured society of France. But I think we I probably haven't covered everything that we are better at. I think we are more discreet than they are and that sometimes is important, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's a mistake because people really don't know what you are talking about. Being so careful, do you know what I mean?

VC They miss the point.

PR They miss it, yes. They don't think you really mind or something like that and of course you do.

VC And the essence of a good diplomat? Or the essential qualities?

PR To be able to listen, that's very important. At least to give the impression of minding what the other person is up to or whatever he is talking about; and of course to be able to express the views of your government, if there are such. You are supposed to be able to do that succinctly.

VC So you do have to be very articulate.

PR Yes, I think so.

VC And you clearly must have had a lot of these qualities because you went on then to two very important jobs, Cyprus High Commissioner, always a knotty one.

PR That was awkward, that drove me nearly nuts but...

VC ...tell me why.

PR Well, because you couldn't go into a room, party after party, as diplomats did, without immediately, "British high Commissioner, right, let's have a go at him about the Cyprus problem". The so-called Cyprus problem is your life. I longed to get out of it. So it was good when we could go and look at some painted churches and things like that.

VC Were there any advantages in being there?

PR Oh yes, quite a lot of the climate was good and you could swim very well.

VC ...nice ruins.

PR Yes, and nice people. I liked the Cypriots. Despite all the trouble they meant very well towards us. I think that is something we are rather bad at accepting. When the people do like the British, don't just scorn it.

VC Don't take it for granted.

PR No, that's right, and I think the Cypriots certainly did feel an affection from which I benefited.

VC Was there any progress made do you think in your time? Did you hop backwards and forwards to the UN and subsequent High Commissioners?

PR No I didn't. When I went there was some sort of progress towards a solution. We used to have consultative breakfasts in my house with the UN representative (called Gobbi, of all names), the American Ambassador and a member of my staff and sometimes one of the other diplomats. This was great fun. We thought out what we could do, and very little could we do. I have actually been preaching that there won't be a solution; that has been my view.

VC Well, you've been proved right for a long time.

PR For a long time I have, but I'm not sure I am going to be right now. I think now that they have allowed people to go across, backwards and forwards, which I of course always could, that is a step, it seems nothing but could be much more.

VC Is it to do with personalities?

PR Yes I think so. If Denktash and Glafkos Clerides (who has now gone of course) went, there would be hope. And now it is a question of getting rid of Denktash. I always said that until you have people of sufficient calibre to accept that something must be given as well as

taken you would never have a hope. I don't know, I think some compromise might be possible but it won't be a solution, it will just be a compromise.

Vc One would have thought the lever of membership of the European Union would be the most powerful lever, and that hasn't done it.

PR It hasn't done it. To be honest, I always said it wouldn't. I can say that, yes. David Hannay, who has been running around pretending he knows about Turks and Greeks, was quite cross with me because I said I didn't think that this was going to happen. Not all that long ago I sat next to Douglas Hurd and said that I rather doubt that this was going to come about and I noticed that David Hannay was rather optimistic. His riposte was that he hoped I hadn't said that to Hannay. I don't want to say anything more but I think people do have illusions. Denktash actually helped to save one of our dogs that got lost in Cyprus.

VC He wasn't totally without virtue then.

PR No, actually he is a very amusing chap, but he doesn't have any sort of window about the subject of Cyprus.

VC So you knew him personally.

PR Oh yes, I used to go and see him. I knew him well. If you are there for three years, I think it was three years (1979-1982) you get to know people. Yes, I would say if you are talking about careers, I don't think anyone should serve too long in Cyprus, it is too closed in. But maybe that is going to change; let us hope.

VC It is very oppressive.

PR There is nothing except 'the problem'.

VC But I must ask you about Denktash and his personality, you were saying that he was a nice man but he was rather closed in his vision?

PR Totally closed. He was all right but he's more closed than the Turks are. He would lose his job of course; he would lose his position if there were a solution.

VC He would, a lot was hanging on it, but it wasn't Clerides, it was somebody else.

PR Glafkos Clerides and Denktash were at school together, at the English school there. I knew Glafkos Clerides very well. He was an RAF pilot during the war. He is probably about 80 now. But he has now gone. He was president.

VC And what did you make of him?

PR Oh, I liked him. But he had no flexibility either. He was frightened of his position.

VC So after that knotty, thorny problem, which you didn't much enjoy but you did enjoy Cyprus...

PR ...oh, we enjoyed it. It is an enjoyable island in many ways as long as you don't get going too much on 'the problem'.

VC They sent you to Greece.

PR Yes. That was the first time they had sent anyone who had served as High Commissioner in Cyprus.

VC That was what I was going to pick up. And did that have an effect. Did that make any ripples?

PR Yes. I got there and I thought perhaps the Greeks wouldn't accept me because I had seen them in action in Cyprus and I knew how devious they are, extremely devious. When I got there one of the first things I did was to go to a lunch for European Union Heads of Mission. There was a Greek from the foreign ministry there, hosting it and he made a little speech and

said of course we couldn't expect very much of Cyprus because they put our representative there in prison. I had shaken hands with the representative there just a few days ago you see, and I thought well, what do I do? Do I say, 'well, I think you are misinformed.' I didn't do anything actually, I said nothing. But afterwards I told him quietly that I thought he was a little bit misled. I didn't know the man very well then. But he also told a story about barges ready to invade the Greek islands and so I took our car, a Rolls, across into Turkey and drove all the way up the coast looking for these barges, which of course weren't there. I came back and was then able to say to this chap, 'you know, the barges have gone.' I don't know if that is particularly clever but at least it undermined something that was false. That's all you could say.

VC These myths accumulate.

PR Oh, he knew perfectly well that the whole thing was a put-up job.

VC So just to underline this the British ambassador going in a Rolls was more effective than for example your first secretary going out, and it was a statement was it, a demonstration?

PR No, it was really that I wanted to go up and down the coast. You mustn't dignify it. We could get a boat from Samos to Kusadasi but the car was very wide, I was afraid of scraping it. It was rather old. We took the Greek driver who was a bit nervous, naturally enough. He hadn't ever been in Turkey; but the Turks treated him very well and we borrowed a Turkish driver from the Consulate General in Istanbul and drove round with the two of them. They couldn't talk to each other but they could communicate.

VC That is a clever solution, I think, to a small problem.

PR A tiny problem, but otherwise we wouldn't have got to the one remaining wooden mosque and all that, which is in Istanbul. We stayed three days there and we did a trip. I got a rocket from the Chief Clerk for going there at all. It cost money you know, and all this sort of thing. So I said thank you very much but I benefited.

VC That again reflects, if you like, on the balance of power between the post and Chief Clerk. He could tick you off, as it were, but he couldn't do actually very much and you could riposte.

PR Well, he could get rid of me. He could say this chap is doing these subversive things. It was Derek Day. I thought it was rather short sighted.

VC A bit bureaucratic perhaps.

PR Well, it was. I thought I had showed initiative actually.

VC And the issues you were dealing with again, Perry, what was the most important thing?

PR In Greece. Two members of my staff were murdered. British Council people. They were all on our diplomatic list which is one way to get round the bureaucracy. We knew them. Ken Whitty was the best known.

VC Do you want to tell me a bit about that? Was it just a murder or was it a political murder?

PR It was a political murder. It was done because the Queen was in Jordan at the time and they didn't like that, these people, 20th of November I think they call themselves. They wanted a British victim. So they caught our staff. You advised staff not to choose the same route on the way to the office, but if there was only one route you couldn't do much about it. I'm afraid that is what happened to the brigadier recently. So they were just shot. I was up on the hill walking the dogs and I came down and there was a member of my staff running up the hill in a suit in the hot sun. I thought this man is being very silly. He is going to be ill, but he was fine. Ken Whitty was a constituent of Geoffrey Howe who at that stage was Foreign Secretary. So there was a flurry about that. I wrote to the Foreign Office and said they might have sent us a message to calm the staff a bit. We didn't need it, I said, we were quite all right, but you didn't even remember us. The Chief Clerk was very apologetic.

VC Who was the PUS at the time?

PR I think it was Michael Palliser.

VC So they missed a trick there.

PR They missed a trick. It was a formality in a sense, but I think if you are trying to build up trust with members of the Service you will remember things like that.

VC What did you do to try to...

PR ...well first of all I told them all to stay in their houses and not go out for a day or two. And then I had them all into the embassy and we talked about it. Then we took a little precaution here and there but there wasn't much we could do. That was it, and then they started a fund in remembrance of Whitty, but it never got going. He wasn't particularly brilliant or anything and nobody contributed much.

VC What a terrible thing to happen on your watch, as it were.

PR It was difficult, yes. That's perhaps a one-off. Most of the time really was occupied with trying to get the Greeks to behave well in the European Union and in NATO, that sort of thing. NATO was quite a big element there because the Americans supplied the Greeks with quite a lot of arms, as they do the Turks.

VC I was going to ask you about Greek - Turkish relations in your time.

PR Well, the Greeks thought that the Turks were the devil and very important, and the Turks didn't think the Greeks were very important at all. There are about 12 million Greeks and 50 million Turks. That says it all. There were signs that the Greeks were beginning to realise they had better get on with the Turks. I think there are signs and to that extent David Hannay was probably right. There are signs that there will be a change, but I never thought it was going to happen in my lifetime. I still don't think so, though it depends on how long

Denktash lives. If he goes there will be at least a chance, but I don't think there will be a lasting solution. That's somewhere in the future.

VC Does it matter?

PR It might not. You are right, it might not, except that there are some Greeks with property in the north and some people the other way round and you somehow have to get over that. I think they were beginning to get over it. I think there is hope. And there are stories, some Greeks that I met, who had been across and been to the house they used to have before Turkey invaded and the people inside welcomed them and had given them lunch.

VC Yes.

PR Well, you may think that is nothing but it isn't.

VC No, no I don't, I think it is difficult for both sides.

PR It's quite a lot. And they were very nice and all that. Of course they weren't getting out of the house.

VC No, exactly, that's what I mean.

PR But it wouldn't have done them much good if they did because the Greeks wouldn't stay there.

VC So, your time in Greece. It seems like such a wonderful posting. Was it?

PR No, not in every way. It was very good. I suppose I can say I am a classicist, that probably helps a bit. But I think the Greeks are rather a disappointment themselves. They don't think much of other people. Some of our Greek friends are charming and very nice but even they exaggerate everything for effect vis à vis the Turks. The Turks play too big a role in their lives I think.

VC You'd have thought the EU might have taken over by now.

PR Yes, that is just what a number of people within the missions thought.

VC Balkan connection? What was happening in the Balkans? Yugoslavia wasn't erupting at that stage.

PR No, it wasn't. It wasn't a case, a problem. Macedonia is always a problem, because there are two bits of Macedonia, you know. It's a name which we gave to the Greeks.

VC And what about British tourists misbehaving?

PR I didn't have much of that actually. I am horrified to see the way they are behaving but of course the Greeks are very straitlaced about that sort of thing. Places are ruined one after the other by young tourists. That is easy to say. They say that you are just an old buffer, but the fact is of course that we won't have access to them.

VC And it doesn't do the British reputation any good.

PR ...oh no. It does a lot of harm to the British reputation.

VC So you left, and left the service with enormous regret, did you, or was it time to go?

PR I don't know. You see when you asked me would you do it again I said yes. But of course what I ought to have added was subject to conditions. I think things have changed. One or two things that happen nowadays wouldn't have happened when I was there and I don't think I would enjoy them very much. But that is inevitable, time goes on. In Washington, for example, people give parties in the Rotunda not at home. That would remove for me at least a large element of the purpose of entertaining. I think we are wrong. I think that Greeks and Cypriots and Viennese and Italians all rather like families. They like the feel. Why not, it's much more fun anyway.

VC Does it really oil the wheels, was it cost effective, when you consider the houses that we are in because of the entertaining, and stuff.

PR If we think that cost effective means we have got to see immediate effects from a party, no. If you think it is building up something which does produce results later, probably.

VC Moving on to the more general, back a little as it were, the overview if you like, what was the most important, significant success that you had, do you think?

PR Success?

VC You are probably too modest to think in those terms.

PR I don't think in those terms, no, I don't think we did have much success. At most we may have helped to prevent some disasters. I suppose occasionally there were things that went right, usually to do with NATO or the European Union.

VC And perhaps in strengthening relationships?

PR Oh yes, you could certainly say that but that ought to be normal anyway, that's not something extra.

VC ...bread and butter.

PR It is, but you do it. That is one reason why you are there.

VC And in Greece, particular relationships, this was Papandreou, wasn't it?

PR Yes, I knew Papandreou pretty well, I used to go and see him almost every month.

VC And how did you get on with him?

PR Oh quite well.

VC And what kind of man do you think he was?

PR He wanted to be a scholar, a professor, but he was not a methodical man. I will tell you a story about Papandreou. I used to go and see him every so often, and I always had an agenda which I said I wanted to get settled and quite often we did get it settled really, because they weren't all that big items. And then I would come back, and on one occasion I came back and I said to the Greeks, the department dealing with us, well now, what about this, this and this. Oh, they said, 'we haven't heard from the President about that, don't know about that at all.' So I said, 'well, I did keep a record of what went on and I sent it to London, and you could have a copy if you like.' 'Oh do send it to us', so I said, 'we can work from that can we?' And they agreed. That gives you some idea of working in Greece.

VC Excellent.

PR Well, it's not the way to do it. No railway would be run that way but you see, what else do you do?

VC I don't know.

PR No, nor did I. And it worked. Things that we had settled were settled. Sounds like something out of the bible or something but that's how it was. I liked the Greeks actually, despite all their deviousness and all the rest of it. They were a very generous people, they were very hospitable, we came out of Greece unable to eat any more roast beef! (the standard meal for farewell parties for the British Ambassador).

VC I can well imagine.

PR Every hostess had given us beef, and if you're the guest of honour in that way to say goodbye, you have to eat some.

VC What about living conditions and being an ambassador and all that?

PR Well, it's pretty good, in Greece certainly. I say very good, we had a nice house, a very good house...

VC ...hot, isn't it, a bit exposed.

PR Yes, but we had air-conditioning. I refused to let them rewire it while I was there, my poor successor but one had to have it done, but it's good and we had very good staff, an excellent driver called Lofty.

VC Who was five foot two or something, was he?

PR No, but he was a very good driver and a real friend. When my sons arrived and we weren't there, he would take them in and give them supper, that sort of thing which I don't think you will get everywhere. The Italians might do it but not everybody.

VC And any comment on ambassadorial duties and family life? What I was getting at really is the complaint people have that when their children do come out they can't be around to see them because their duties take them away from the family. It takes some management, doesn't it?

PR It takes management, it also takes a co-operative wife, with all respect. I don't want to overdo that but I think that is a key. The wife has to play a little bit of the game, if the family is going to work. Do you see what I mean? Perhaps I am over emphasizing that. You can't be there yourself all the time. You have got to go and do whatever you have to do. The children went to boarding school. That, - coming out to Greece - you see, we were very lucky. I mean Cyprus and Greece and Italy. You can't do much better and I do think that made a lot of difference. I'm grateful to the Office.

VC Anything else that you can think of that we haven't covered and...?

PR I think some of the rules and regulations were a little rigidly applied but then I don't know how you would do it otherwise, it's a very big Service and they have got to be fair. You know all about this as much as I do, I am sure.

VC One of the things that always bothers me when I hear about people talking about the Diplomatic Service is that they see it in the context of one nation Britain, they don't see it as an international profession and we were talking about it in a slightly tangential way, access to the Diplomatic Service and there has been a tradition of regarding diplomats as rather sort of upper class and certainly in bygone ages they were, I don't know quite how to put this but there is better access now than there used to be.

PR You mean people get in more easily?

VC I mean different kinds of people get in, coming back to this public school thing, just as able perhaps even more able but without the imprimatur.

PR Yes, I don't know about this very much. I remember my Australian colleague saying to me, 'Do you mind my coming to talk to your wives about the way we do things?' I said it depends on what you are going to say but no, I don't mind. And what he was going to say was that he was the Head of this mission, the next mission his wife would be in charge. I then asked the wives whether they could meet to hear him, and they all said it was a load of nonsense, but they listened to him.

VC Was this in Greece?

PR Yes.

VC It was in the 1980s.

PR Yes it was. It's a little time ago now but there we are. I don't know whether that will prosper, of course it depends on the individuals. I think that is a thing which is very

important. We forget that they are individuals. They are different and it is no good acting like a bulldozer, it doesn't work. I would say that but I've only got the experiences that I have been through and things have changed.

VC We were talking about one of the attributes that diplomats must have, of course one of the attributes they have to have now is IT awareness...

PR ...yes, and I certainly haven't got that, that's quite true.

VC And of course the other thing is that desk officers communicate with desk officers all round the world so the hierarchical aspect has changed, have you any views on that? In the old days as I was suggesting papers would go up and all that has changed. Have you got any views on that?

PR Well, the only view I have, it's a bit dated I think; no embassy is any good if no-one is in charge of it.

VC So you have to have an authority figure?

PR I think so. I haven't deviated from that at all. I remember very well somebody, my predecessor in Italy, went off to be head of mission in Bangladesh of all places, his mission became known as the one where there was no one in control. Conflicting messages came from it. I think that is wrong. Thinking about what you were saying, these people sending off their messages, there is a real danger there of saying things they think are right, but they are not quite right. We have seen it in these last few days in Whitehall with the prime minister and others. And of course you have to keep some control of it, not every message. That would be nonsense. But I think you can't lose all sort of direction from the top. I believe in the field marshal effect.

VC And the field marshal's baton in every knapsack.

PR Well, perhaps. It is out of date, I realise that, but I don't think that is wrong. I hope

they'll come back but I don't think they'll manage it. That's one of the disadvantages of the IT capability, they can just send a letter off.

VC I am going to stop there. Thank you very much.