

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

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Career Details (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

2nd Lieutenant, Rifle Brigade, 1955–57

Foreign Office, 1960 p 2

Language training, MECAS, 1960 p 3

Assistant Political Agent, Dubai, Trucial States, 1962–64 pp 4-8

Eastern Department, Foreign Office, 1964 p 8

Private Secretary to Minister of State, FO, 1964–67 p 9

Second (later First) Secretary (Information), Khartoum, 1967–69 pp 11-13

First Secretary (Information), Paris, 1969–72 pp 13-16

Assistant, Science and Technology Department, FCO, 1972–75 pp 16-18

First Secretary and Head of Chancery, Amman, 1975–77 pp 18-19

Counsellor, Kuwait, 1977–79 pp 19-23

Head of Maritime, Aviation and Environment Dept, FCO, 1979–81 pp 23-26

Head of South Asian Department, FCO, 1981–84 pp 26-28

on secondment to BP as Head of Policy Review Unit, 1984–85 pp 28-29

Berlin: Minister, 1985–92 (Deputy Commandant, British Military Government, 1985–90, pp 29-38; Head of Embassy Office, 1990–92, pp 39-43)

Assistant Under-Secretary of State (Middle East), FCO, 1993 pp 43-45

Ambassador to the Czech Republic, 1994-97 pp 45-49

Sir Michael (St Edmund) Burton KCVO, CMG
interviewed by Malcolm McBain on Tuesday, 19 August 2008

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Education and decision to join the FCO, 1960

MM May I begin by asking you something about your parents, your education, and how you came to join the Foreign Office?

MB Yes. I was from a military family. My father was an Indian Army officer (in the Gurkhas) who had a very distinguished career in the Burma Campaign in the last war winning a DSO and two bars. Although I did not visit India until many years later, the Raj was, in a way, a part of my background.

I was at school at Bedford School after attending a prep school called Woodcote House in Surrey where two of my class mates were to be my colleagues four decades later in Germany as the Ambassador in Bonn and the Commandant in Berlin! My personal highlight of my time at Bedford was playing the prince in the school production of Hamlet. When I was there my father suggested that, since I was good at languages, I should join the Diplomatic Service. Neither he, nor I, knew much about it, but it was an idea which never left me. I did my military service as a subaltern in the Rifle Brigade during the Malayan Emergency on active service. From there took I up my scholarship (in German) at Magdalen College, Oxford where I eventually took a degree in Politics, Philosophy and Economics. I then joined the Foreign Office by the open examination in 1960. The first thing I did was ask if I could defer my entry by a year in order to take up a scholarship, which the French Government had offered me, to go to the *Sciences Po* at the Sorbonne in Paris for a year. The interviewer asked me what I was proposing to study, and when I said that I was thinking of studying the French position on the Common Market, which had just been set up, I was given the immortal reply – “Oh, come on old boy, everybody knows that’s not going to work. You’d better join straight away.” So that’s what happened.

MM So you went into the Foreign Office in 1960 and what happened then?

Hard language training 1960

MB I was offered a choice of which difficult language I would like to learn and I chose Arabic, because it seemed to me that there was a wide variety of posts where one could serve in the Arabic speaking world, and also that Britain still counted there at that time. Finally, that it was a part of the world that I felt that one could get to understand the local people, whereas I wasn't sure that I could really get to grips with how Far Easterners – Chinese, Japanese – how their minds worked. So I decided that Arabic would be my choice, and I was then sent to MECAS, the language school that the Foreign Office ran at that time in Shemlan, up in the Lebanese hills, looking down on Beirut Airport. MECAS – the Middle-East Centre for Arabic Studies – was a very effective place to learn the language, and to learn about the Arab world. There was a long course which was broken up by a so-called language break in the middle, where one went out for a month into the Arab world to try and speak the language that one had been learning in a rather academic way. And then there was an advanced course. The whole thing took fifteen months.

MM Who was the Director?

MB The Director, when I arrived, was Sir Donald Maitland. He together with Sir James Craig had established the course at a high level of academic excellence. Both of their titles of course came later. James Craig was my boss at my first posting after MECAS. The other Director I served under was Sir John Wilton and he took over from Maitland after three or four months.

MM Where did you go to do your Arabic familiarisation period?

MB Yes, it lasted about a month. I started in Aleppo in Northern Syria, but that didn't work very well, because I was staying in the Baron's Hotel and wasn't actually meeting many Arabs to talk Arabic to. So I was advised to go and stay with a Syrian family. That didn't work out either because there was a young woman about my own age, and all she wanted to do was go dancing every evening and to speak French, so I abandoned that and worked my way down the Syrian coast back to MECAS and then to Egypt, where I finally managed to speak Arabic in Alexandria.

MM That was a good introduction. What was your first posting?

Assistant Political Agent, Dubai, 1962

MB My first posting was in Dubai as the Assistant Political Agent. The Gulf States at that time were still Protected States under British administration, and the treaty arrangements were exclusive. That is to say only Britain was allowed to have representation in the Gulf States at that time. Other countries were excluded. The Trucial States consisted of Abu Dhabi, which is the largest, and had its own Political Agency. All the other states were the responsibility of the Political Agent in Dubai. I was the Assistant Political Agent, and my boss, as I've already said, was James Craig, a very distinguished Arabist. My role as his assistant was to deputise for him and to help in keeping in contact with all the sheikhs, particularly those further away from Dubai – I spent a lot of time in a Land Rover. One of my functions in Dubai was to act as a judge of the Trucial States in Dubai. In effect this was the function of a magistrate, and it was quite testing, because I had no legal training or background. The administration of justice was somewhat simple, in that the judge found himself responsible for the defence of the accused as well as forming a judgment at the end of the proceedings. The prosecution was in the hands of the Police Chief. But on the whole I think we administered justice fairly, although my first case went against me on appeal and a proper judge came and reviewed the evidence.

MM Did the accused think that they were being fairly dealt with?

MB Well, not the first one who, as I say, appealed. And when the proper judge, who was a former Attorney-General of Kenya, Sir John Wyatt, came down and heard the evidence, he reprimanded me for not having written everything down. He said there's no point in being right if you haven't written down your reasons. So I was sent to get some proper instruction in that role, and after that I did rather better.

MM When you say that these were Protected States and that other states, nations, were not entitled to have representation in them, how was that done? Was that done

by the British, or by the sheikhs themselves? Did they wish to have that kind of system?

MB All these arrangements went back to the treaties which were signed in the 19th century. The arrangement was that Britain as the protecting power was responsible for the security of the signatory states and for their foreign affairs. The states themselves were responsible for their own internal administration, and the administration of justice for their own people. That is to say when I was there all Arabs were dealt with by the local court, but non-Arabs and that included Iranians and Pakistanis, as well as Europeans, were dealt with in our courts. We weren't just handling external affairs and defence for them, we were also at that stage helping the ruler of Dubai, who was a very remarkable man – Rashid Bin Makhtoum – to develop his state. Our contribution, as far as he was concerned, was finding British advisers to help him to set up organisations for power, water, the police, agriculture, the customs, and financial arrangements. We produced very good advisers for all of that, and their advice over the years helped Dubai to become the very well-administered state which it now is.

MM That's fine. I just want to get you to comment a little bit more about the status of these states. Were they independent states in treaty relationship with Britain?

MB Yes, they were independent sheikhdoms. They weren't states when the treaties were established. They were sheikhdoms and as sheikhs they signed treaty arrangements with Britain.

MM And they said – we confer on you the right to deal with our external affairs and with our defence?

MB That's correct.

MM Did they pay us anything for that?

MB Oh no.

MM We were happy to take it on because?

MB We were more than happy to take it on because it gave us an exclusive presence on the southern coast of the Persian Gulf at a time when oil was beginning to be developed in significant quantities. When I was there Abu Dhabi oil came on stream, both onshore and offshore, and very substantial revenue started to be generated. There wasn't any oil being produced at that time in any of the other Trucial sheikhdoms. That came later as far as Dubai was concerned. Kuwait, at the northern end of the Gulf, became independent in 1961, which of course ended the exclusive arrangements with Britain, and from then on other countries established diplomatic presences in Kuwait.

MM It was perfectly open for these sheikhdoms to say we wish to abrogate the treaty and to establish new relations?

MB It was open to them. In fact the treaty arrangements suited them, at that time, very well, in spite of the fact that Arab nationalism with Gamal Abdul Nasser in Egypt the figurehead, was exercising considerable influence throughout the Arab world, and in the Gulf. One of our concerns at the time was that the Egyptian teachers in the schools were disseminating anti-British propaganda, and were not working to our advantage. This was a concern. But the sheikhdoms were 100% in favour at the level of the sheikh of maintaining existing arrangements. So much so that when Britain did withdraw from the Gulf at the end of the 1960s and in 1971, they were shocked that we should make this move, and even suggested at that point that they should pay for the military protection which we had been providing them with at no charge up until that point.

MM Of course by then we were unable to afford it anyway.

MB We were unable to afford it, and so that was that.

MM Very interesting. Thank you for that. I don't think I want to go into the manumission of slaves or any of those details or indeed of the frontier disputes, unless there is anything interesting on the subject of frontier disputes?

MB It is interesting that at that time we were engaged in trying to delimit the frontiers between all these sheikhdoms, many of which were very small, and were beginning to have some importance because of the possibility of oil, and also that the projection of these frontiers into the sea would define these areas for oil exploration. My own involvement was in a small town on the east of the Batina coast of the Trucial States peninsula – a town called Dibba – where three sheikhdoms came together and there was trouble between them. I was sent by Mr Craig on a frontier delimitation mission, together with the ruler of the smallest of the sheikhdoms, Umm al Quwain, and the *khadi*, or the chief judge, of Aden. We sat down for a week in a very hot August listening to the evidence given by all the locals as to who traditionally used a certain well and so on, and we delimited the frontier. This delimitation lasted for about a month before further trouble brewed up. But the main task of delimiting frontiers was being done by Julian Walker, who was a great expert, and wherever he was in the world on his Foreign Office postings, he was brought back every summer to deal with that year's property disputes, and get everything back on the right lines.

MM What was his status?

MB His status, if I remember right, was Supernumerary Assistant Political Agent. He had been an Assistant Political Agent in his time. He has written a very interesting book on that time, but he was brought back on an *ad hoc* basis to report to the Political Agent and Political Resident who was in overall charge – the senior British official in the Gulf.

MM Who was?

MB He was based in Bahrain and was Sir William Luce.

MM So that was a very, very important area of activity? What was your impression of Sir James Craig?

MB James Craig was very effective. First of all he had this amazing command of Arabic. He had been an academic teacher of Arabic before joining the Service. He had, as I mentioned, helped establish the course at MECAS, and this was his first proper Diplomatic Service appointment, and he was very thrilled to have it. He was very effective, particularly in developing an excellent relationship with Sheikh Rashid and with the other sheikhs as well. So this was the bedrock if you like, of what became his extremely distinguished career in the Arab world.

MM It speaks volumes for the importance of long service in these areas, does it not?

MB Indeed. And Craig, I believe I'm right in saying, had initially said that he would only join the Foreign Service, which they were encouraging him to do, if he could serve exclusively in the Arab world. The Foreign Office wasn't prepared to make that undertaking. He came in eventually the second time they went round this course. He came in and although he had certainly one posting out of area, for the rest of his time he was in the Arab world, or involved in the Arab world.

MM I think that is terribly important. Should we leave the Trucial States and go back to your appointment to Eastern Department in the Foreign Office 1964 to 1967?

Posting to Eastern Department of the Foreign Office, 1964

MB Yes. It wasn't Eastern Department throughout those whole three years, but I started in Eastern Department, which was a very good department, on the Iraq desk. Iraq at that time being under one of their dictators – Abdul Karim Kassem - and the Embassy was reporting on events of course. There was trouble with the Kurdish regions even at that time, and I remember that the Kurds in London said that they weren't getting a proper hearing in the Foreign Office, and could they come and meet us? It was decided that in the interests of our relations with the Iraqi government, we shouldn't meet them in the Foreign Office. We should meet them somewhere else, which we did in the club that my immediate boss, Percy Cradock, the Department Assistant, was a member of, which was the Reform Club. So we met the Kurds in the Reform Club, including Jalal Talabani, who is now the President of Iraq, to the point where I think the Kurds began to think that the Reform Club was the Foreign Office.

If they wanted to mount a demonstration, they mounted it outside the Reform Club, rather to the bewilderment of the members. And also the Iraqi government had recently nationalised the Iraq Petroleum Company, and there was a lot of work spilling out from that. But after a time I was moved to the Iran desk, still under Percy Cradock. The Head of Department was Willie Morris, and this was the time when the Shah was very much in control, and we were concerned to remain in his good books. There were important arms sales. There was a relationship which depended on getting as much business out of Iran as possible.

MM Well we were doing well in terms of exports to Iran and indeed to Iraq too even as late as your time on that desk.

Appointment as Private Secretary to Minister of State

MB After a time on that desk, I was selected to be the Private Secretary to one of the Ministers of State, Walter Padley, who had a fairly low profile, and was succeeded by Fred Mulley, who had a somewhat higher profile and went on to be Secretary of State for Defence after I had left.

MM That was a Labour government?

MB The Labour government in power from 1963 to 1970

MM So how did you find those Ministers and their methods of working?

MB Well. Walter Padley, to be honest, didn't cut much ice. He was a trade union official, and he wasn't very keen on travelling, and so there's really not much to say about him. Fred Mulley as I say was much more effective. It was the time when we were still excluded from the Common Market and were restricted to observing from the sidelines. But there were of course contacts with Brussels and Fred Mulley used to go out there and hold discussions.

MM I thought we'd had our earlier applications refused.

MB Yes, we'd had the first application refused.

MM It would have been in the time of the Labour government.

MB Yes. I can't put a date on it. But my colleague from Eastern Department, David Hannay, was posted out there to work in the Mission in Brussels. So that was the start of his very close involvement with European affairs over the years.

MM Well let's not worry too much about the details of those Ministers, long forgotten I'm afraid. It must have given you however quite a bit of insight into the way the Foreign Office worked?

MB Indeed, and it was quite a thrill when the great men of the day assembled for a meeting in the Minister's office, including the diminutive form of Sir Frank Roberts, who became a great friend of mine later on, to the point where I delivered the address at his memorial service.

MM Great man indeed.

MB Yes a great man.

Security implications of marriage to a Czech national in 1967

MM Should we move on to – well you mentioned to me that you became engaged to a girl with Czech origins. Was she in fact Czech?

MB Yes. Her mother and father were Czech, but she had been a refugee from the age of two. Her parents had left the country when she was two. She'd been brought up in the Middle East and in Cyprus, and then sent to school when the Cyprus situation became ugly – she was sent to a boarding school in England, and so she was actually indistinguishable from any English girl when I knew her. But her Czech origins created a very big problem for me in that the Foreign Office decided, after some delay, I would say, that the marriage created a security risk. I had to postpone my wedding by a year and had two interviews with the Secretary of State himself, who

was Michael Stewart, to argue my case, and he was very sympathetic personally. Finally it was decided that I could go ahead with my marriage, but certain conditions were imposed which were that my security vetting certificate was withdrawn and I could not serve behind the Iron Curtain, particularly, of course, in Czechoslovakia - a point which is relevant later in the story. But it's the background to our being posted to Khartoum almost immediately after we were married, which seemed to be a place which was out of harm's way. In fact it turned out not to be out of harm's way because the first thing that happened was that our archivist turned out to be passing documents to the Soviet Embassy, and was arrested and went to prison. So the Cold War was running at full blast in Khartoum.

Posting to Khartoum, 1967

MM Was your archivist being paid money by the Soviets?

MB He was being paid some money. It was quite a sad case really, but he was being paid. Yes.

MM Did he pass anything of any value?

MB I don't know. I didn't have a positive vetting certificate at the time. (Laughter) I can't believe that there was anything of huge value in those days in Khartoum.

MM But it must have been an interesting posting nevertheless?

MB It was a fascinating posting. It was an interesting time in Sudan. It was going through a period of being a functioning democracy. The Prime Minister was an Oxford-educated scion of the Mahdi family – Sadiq al-Mahdi – a man of great charisma, and great authority in the Sudan, which of course was a very tribal society. But there was an opposition. The opposition then took over and it was, as I say, a recognisable democracy, until just one week after we finally left, when the military coup took place which brought in Colonel Numeiri. But the big excitement shortly after our arrival was the Six Day War in June 1967, and the Sudanese chose to be involved to the extent of breaking diplomatic relations with Britain and the United

States on the basis of what we call the Big Lie, which was that the Royal Air Force and the United States Air Force had been responsible for the bombing of the Arab air forces on the ground in the first stage of the war, which of course we had not. But diplomatic relations were broken, and our Ambassador, Sir Robert Fowler, left the country, although he later returned. This left us as the British Interests Section of the Italian Embassy. Otherwise we were not greatly affected, and for day to day purposes, the Counsellor, Norman Reddaway, was in charge of the Embassy. The Six Day War was followed very shortly by the summit of the Arab League in Khartoum – the Khartoum Conference. This gave me the opportunity at least to see in the flesh the Arab leaders arriving through the streets of Khartoum, including Nasser and including for the first time on the public stage as far as I know, Yasser Arafat, the leader of the PLO. Fortuitously, our house in Khartoum was across the road from that of the Prime Minister, Mohamed Ahmed Mahjoub, and when we were giving a reception on one of the nights during the conference, for the British and American journalists who were covering it, somewhat to our surprise, television lights were illuminated on the other side of the road, and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia and President Nasser arrived at Mahjoub's house, went inside and proceeded to make the agreement which ended the civil war in the Yemen, in which they had been supporting the two rival sides. So that was quite a historic moment. Our journalistic guests were amazed at our prescience at holding our party on that particular night and rushed across the road to cover the story!

The Khartoum Conference was a great disaster for the Arabs. By committing themselves to the Three Noes – no peace, no recognition of Israel and no negotiations – they painted themselves into a corner from which they took years to extricate themselves.

MM Were you dealing with journalists at that time? Did you find that you were able to get on good terms with Sudanese journalists?

MB Yes. They were all very agreeable and we were trying to persuade them that Arab nationalism was not the right path, and that communism was not the right path. The Communist Party was quite strong in Sudan. Of course we put out the material that London sent us, but the more effective way to get through to them was to go

round in the evening with a bottle of Black Label whisky, and drink one's way through it until they began to see the light of reason.

MM Which they no doubt did eventually?

MB Yes eventually (laughter).

MM So that was Khartoum. We can move to your posting to Paris.

Posting to Paris as First Secretary (Information), 1969

MB Well it was quite a culture shock to move from Khartoum where everybody was clothed from head to foot in a white robe, to Paris in the reign of the newly-invented the mini-skirt! But it was also politically an extremely interesting moment, because General De Gaulle had just left the scene following his resignation as a result of *les évènements* of 1968, and a misjudged referendum. The presidential election took place at the time of our arrival, and Georges Pompidou became President of France. The Embassy was in some difficulty because of an incident known as the Soames Affair, which arose because the newly politically appointed Ambassador, Christopher Soames (a former Conservative Minister appointed by a Labour Government), had reported to London on his initial call on President de Gaulle. Some of the remarks that de Gaulle had made on the Common Market seemed to suggest that France was not necessarily wedded to the Common Market as it was, and could consider alternative arrangements. This led to a big diplomatic row because when these remarks were reported by us to the Germans, they were very concerned; the German officials got on to their French counterparts, who denied that these remarks had ever been made, and put it all down to Soames's poor command of French (which was not the case). At this point the press on both sides of the Channel got into the act, and the sparks began to really fly. Finally it was decided enough was enough and a lid had to be put on the incident. But a scapegoat needed to be found and the scapegoat was the Information Section of the British Embassy in Paris for inaccurate briefing.

MM Which was you?

MB That was the precise moment at which I joined the Information Section. Many French journalists would not speak to us. Many British journalists wouldn't speak to us either. So we weren't in an ideal position for doing our job. But things began to improve very swiftly under the Pompidou government and with their new Foreign Minister, Maurice Schumann, who was pro-British, and Christopher Soames, after his rather inauspicious start, was able to do a very effective job in repairing the relationship, and in putting across our case for joining the EEC, as it then was. Our role in the Press Section was to reinforce those efforts. My particular responsibility under the Information Counsellor, was for the Paris media and one of my colleagues, Kim Isolani, was responsible for the provincial media. So my role was to cultivate Parisian journalists, television people, and so on. It was a fascinating, demanding but fulfilling job. They would take, many of them, the Gaullist view that Britain was not really suited to join the European venture, because it was not committed to Europe. It had involvements in the rest of the world and so on. The line I would sometimes take was that that wasn't really so, that we hadn't left, or turned our back on the European enterprise, we had been twice vetoed by the French government, and, furthermore, that since Britain was a country that had invented the concept of clubs, we understood that if we joined the European club, we had to abide by the rules. They weren't entirely convinced by this, but I was able to get away with the argument. Fortunately I was no longer in Paris when we finally did join, and not long afterwards, under a Labour Government, demanded that the terms be renegotiated. But that was what took the bulk of my time.

MM Very interesting material. Were you able to make contact with senior French journalists?

MB Oh yes. The French are quite hierarchical so the likes of Henri Fontaine of Le Monde would only speak to the Counsellor, or the Ambassador, but nevertheless one managed to get one's foot in the door. They were very good company and very interesting people.

MM Did you speak to them in French?

MB Yes. My French is excellent.

MM Necessary for Paris.

MB In fact when I came back to London afterwards I was an interpreter for the Prime Minister in French. Not for the serious part of the discussions so much as for the social side. So that – this was for Mr Heath, the Prime Minister – and there was one awkward moment, I remember, at Chequers where President Pompidou was a guest of Heath, and I was interpreter for the dinner. And after dinner the French President was in conversation with the Governor of the Bank of England, (now) Lord Richardson, and I was called over to interpret, and one said to the other – “I think you should understand that there are great advantages in the crawling peg exchange system”, and I couldn’t for the life of me think how you rendered the crawling peg exchange system into French. I got there, without causing a run on the pound! One finds a way round these things.

MM Well done. That’s interesting. So you were of interpreter standard in French.

MB At that time yes.

MM And did the Office make further use of that?

MB No, I never served again in France. I was more concerned that they should make some use of my German, which they didn’t do till rather later in my career. We’ll come to that in due course. The other thing about Paris was that my time there ended with the Queen’s State Visit in 1972, and that was the first of the four State Visits that I was involved in during my time in the Service, and they were all very significant moments in bilateral relations with the country concerned. The one in France came when we were getting into negotiations to join the EEC. We’d got through the period of the de Gaulle vetoes and so the visit was in a way the benediction of the new relationship which had been built up, largely through the hard work of Christopher Soames, and it was a very glittering affair. I don’t know whether you would like the stories?

MM Well a little story about that would be good I think.

MB Well, in the planning process, although I was quite junior in the Embassy, I had the temerity to suggest when the programme was being planned, and it had been agreed that the Queen would leave at the end of the visit on the Royal yacht from Rouen that it might that be a good occasion to bury the hatchet of hundreds of years of controversy over Joan of Arc, if the Queen, for example, were to pause for a moment on riding through Rouen, and place a rose at the tomb of Joan of Arc. This would be seen as a very exciting event and the whole of France would cheer. But I was told – “Oh come on old boy, that’s rather imaginative, isn’t it?” So it did not take place!

MM What a shame.

MB But, I noticed that when the actual visit took place and they were driving through Rouen, the French government had not left it to the Mayor of Rouen, who was a Centrist politician – opposition politician – to accompany the Queen. They sent the Prime Minister, Jacques Chaban Delmas, and as they passed the spot with the cathedral on one side and Joan of Arc memorial on the other side, Jacques Chaban Delmas carefully drew the Queen’s attention to the gargoyles on the cathedral, so that she would not look in the direction of the Joan of Arc memorial.

MM (laughter) Sad. That was obviously an extremely good time. What was your next place?

Assistant Head of Science and Technology Department in the FCO, 1972

MB I came back to the Foreign Office as an Assistant in one of the functional departments, the Science and Technology Department, which covered three areas of work: the international relations aspects of science, outer space matters and environment diplomacy. The latter was in its early stages, and we had a very effective Under Secretary in the Department of the Environment, Martin Holgate, who really directed our environment diplomacy at that time, and was trying to steer the Common Market away from drawing up its environment policy to such strict standards that they might not be appropriate for an island such as the United

Kingdom, and instead framing objectives in terms of best endeavours. He was partly successful, but not wholly.

One area of particular and immediate interest was space, because Britain had just abolished the Blue Streak launcher programme. Blue Streak had been the basis of the European launcher, managed by ELDO, the European Launcher Development Organisation, and so Europe found itself without a space launcher. The Treasury was very determined that we would not spend, or as they would consider it, waste, any more money on space launchers. So what happened was that a European Space Conference was held in Brussels in December 1972 to decide what to do next, and the British delegation was led by Michael Heseltine, the Industry Minister, then fairly new in the job. Michael Heseltine was the leader of the delegation and I was a member of the delegation. We were a bit late in arriving. We were in ‘fog in the channel, continent cut off’ mode, and found that the French and the Germans had actually reached an agreement which wasn’t at all satisfactory for us and needed to be prised open. What Heseltine did was to propose the setting up of a European Space Agency on the model of NASA, with each country contributing what it did best and had most interest in. The British interest at the time was mainly in satellite technology. So we managed to get out of a big commitment to the French-led launcher programme at that time, and the matter was deftly handled, I would say, by Heseltine.

MM What about Concorde? That was obviously a bit of a problem?

MB Concorde came into the Department when there was a reorganisation of the functions of the Department. Aviation was added during my time. The immediate problem was that when Labour came to power in 1974, they had a manifesto pledge to abolish three projects in their first week in power and these were – the Channel Tunnel, the third London airport at Maplin Sands, and Concorde. They duly abolished the Channel Tunnel and Maplin Sands, but when it came to the Concorde programme, the Foreign Office had to point out that we had a treaty with the French, and that we had better tread carefully and be absolutely certain of our legal position, or we would find ourselves liable to substantial damages to the French government. So this was a case where an enormous amount hinged upon legal advice. Of course

legal advice can go either way, depending upon a comma. However, the Foreign Office people advised that it would be very risky, and on that basis the Concorde project survived. Although we weren't successful in getting many countries to agree to over flying rights and so the economic basis became increasingly flimsy.

MM And even with regard to landing rights? Anyhow I think we can go back to the Middle East on your next posting.

First Secretary, Head of Chancery and Consul in British Embassy, Amman 1975

MB In 1975 we started a stay of five years back in the Middle East; first in Amman in Jordan, and then in Kuwait. On my way to Jordan I stopped for about a month back at MECAS to refresh my Arabic in the lovely village of Shemlan. This was at the time of the run up to the Lebanese civil war, and incidents took place while I was there, which led to the war. We, personally, had an unfortunate, rather dangerous experience. My wife and I were in Beirut itself for a dinner for our wedding anniversary, and then driving up a back road to Shemlan, coming towards us were a line of Palestinian fighters, with guns. The week before, in much the same spot, a UN observer had been killed, so it was a ticklish moment, but my wife is good on these occasions, probably from her background experience in Cyprus during EOKA. She dealt with it very well and they let us drive on our way. So then down to Jordan where my position was as First Secretary, Head of Chancery and Consul. The Ambassador was Glen Balfour Paul, who has just died, and the Counsellor was Ramsay Melhuish. Jordan was, recovering is not the right word, but it had recently been through the tempestuous period known as Black September when the Jordanian army had evicted the PLO and Yasser Arafat, after incidents such as the blowing up of the British Airways aircraft on Dawsons Field. King Hussein had decided that the situation was intolerable. So the PLO had been evicted; Syria had been making threatening noises; and indeed had conducted an incursion into Jordan. So the Jordanian regime seemed to be on pretty shaky ground. However, life in Amman was pretty agreeable, although there was one terrorist incident quite near the Embassy in the Intercontinental Hotel. The Embassy was at that time on what was called the third circle in Amman – the Intercontinental Hotel being only a couple of hundred yards away. A body from the Black September group of the PLO did a commando-style

raid on the hotel and started shooting people up, and the Jordanian Special Forces had to go in and deal with that. It was a quite dramatic incident.

MM How about your official work there?

MB I had this variety of jobs, so my official work was monitoring the Jordanian media, keeping in touch with the journalists, running the Embassy, under the Ambassador, as Head of Chancery and supervising the Consular Section. It was amazing how many Jordanians thought they were deserving of special treatment to receive visas faster than anybody else. I had a great admiration for King Hussein. On the Arab-Israel front it was the time of Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy, which seemed to provide some promise that progress could be made. Plans were produced and discussed, and so we were following all of that, but what also struck me was how little influence Britain really had on these events. We were comforted, I felt, by having very good access to King Hussein so that the Ambassador could go and see him, and King Hussein would talk very freely and tell him what was going on. But I didn't feel that we had much influence over events, and after my last posting in the Arab world which had been in Dubai where we had actually run the place, this was a bit of an eye opener which ultimately caused me to reflect on whether I wanted my career to be too narrowly devoted to the Arab world. But I did become very interested in the whole Arab-Israel issue. I wrote my own suggested peace plan which the Foreign Office were kind enough to comment on – I can't remember the details. It didn't go very far. But it was the beginning of a life-long interest in the whole tragic business.

Counsellor and Head of Chancery, Kuwait, 1977

Then on from there to Kuwait where I was Deputy Head of Mission. The Ambassador was first of all Archie Lamb, who left shortly after I arrived. He was followed by John Cambridge. Archie was a great one for commercial work. He had been cultivating the then Defence Minister, Sheikh Saad, and had got within an ace of landing a contract for patrol boats. Unfortunately, Archie left and said to me – Well, you're in charge now. Make sure it all works well. Well, I'm afraid it didn't work well because shortly afterwards the Emir died, and there was a change of ministerial

posts. The Defence Minister became Prime Minister and was no longer so directly involved. And the contract slipped away from us. It was actually an object lesson, I felt, in how one should never assume that a deal is done until it's done, and not take your eye off the ball merely because it happens to be Christmas – I'm talking about the firm concerned, not about the British Embassy.

MM They failed to produce?

MB Yes, in effect. But, as I say there was a new shuffle of the cards in Kuwait.

MM Can we know which firm that was?

MB I'd rather not say.

MM Well that was the sort of thing that happens in Kuwait. They've got a lot of money and they were ready to spend it, presumably?

MB Yes. British business was doing its best. The Kuwaitis were on quite good relations with Iraq at that time, it seemed. I should have said that when I was in Eastern Department on the Iraq desk, a weekly task was to produce a paragraph for the weekly intelligence summary on the threat to Kuwait from Iraq, and we had done this by looking at the indicators and forming a conclusion as to whether it had gone up or down. When I was actually in Kuwait, this didn't seem a matter of great concern. What became of much more concern later in my posting was the revolution which started in Iran. The Ayatollah Khomeini was ejected from Iraq and initially sought refuge in Kuwait. The Kuwaitis refused him and he went on to Paris, and the rest is history. We were of course watching developments very closely from Kuwait and our newly appointed Ambassador to Tehran, Johnny Graham, staged through Kuwait to try and ensure that he would be able to get on into Tehran to take up his post, which he did. Another person who staged through was George Brown, the former Foreign Secretary, by then a private citizen working for Capital Radio. He felt he had a role in sorting out the problem. When the Queen came on a State visit, which I will come back to in a moment, the Minister accompanying her was David Owen, Foreign

Secretary, and he was naturally following very closely the developments taking place in Iran.

MM Can you fill in the detail a little about – you mentioned indicators in Kuwait. What were the indicators that you were watching so closely?

MB I can't remember exactly, but certainly troop movements were part of it, and any utterances by the Iraq government, which had actually maintained a claim to Kuwait least since the time of Kuwait's independence. Any suggestion that they were upping the impetus of that claim was of course very important, very interesting.

MM What were the dates of the war between Iraq and Iran?

MB It started in 1980, after we had left Kuwait, and lasted until 1988.

MM So why was Khomeini sent out of Iran?

MB He had taken refuge from the Shah in either Kerbala, one of the Shiite holy cities, but Saddam Hussain, who was always concerned about the threat to him from the Shiite elements in Iraq removed him.

MM The Shah was overthrown in 1975?

MB 1979.

MM Oh, that explains Khomeini's expulsion from Iraq. Thank you. I was unsure of the dates on that. You mentioned a bit about the Queen again?

MB Well yes. This was the start of a tour that the Queen and Prince Philip made on the Royal Yacht to the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, and it was important in really re-establishing Britain's prestige in the region after our ignominious departure from the gulf in 1971, eight years earlier. But it was interesting I thought from the protocol point of view of Kuwait, that royal protocol, Buckingham Palace protocol, came up against Arab protocol for the first time on the first visit to an Arab country.

The Arabs have a very ancient way of doing these things; reciprocity is extremely important, as it was to *le roi soleil* in France. So there was a big difficulty over where the Queen would stay, for example. The sheikhs, the ruler, said that he had a perfectly good guest palace and that was where visitors stayed. Well, we were keen that the Queen should be able to stay throughout the whole tour on the Royal Yacht to keep it as her home. So this was an awkward start.

MM How did you overcome it?

MB It was overcome by a personal letter from the Queen to the Emir – quite unusual – saying in effect, I hope you don't mind. There was then a further awkwardness when on the first night there was the State dinner and the Emir came down the steps of his palace and conducted the Queen into dinner, and then the return affair was to be a banquet on the Royal Yacht. The Kuwaitis said to me, because I was in charge of the arrangements, “So presumably the Queen will come down the prow [as the gangway is called], and meet the Emir at the bottom and escort him on board, [as the Emir had into his palace]?” So I went and enquired and was told – “Oh no. That's not going to happen at all. The Emir will come up the prow and will be greeted by the Admiral at the top, who will take him in through the first set of doors to Prince Philip, who will take him through the second set of doors to the Queen”. So I went back to the Kuwaitis and explained this to them and they said – “That's very simple. The Emir won't come.” I had to say, “Please, the Emir has got to come. I can assure you that it will be all right on the evening.” And they said – “Burton, the burden is on your head,” which was a heavy responsibility! But I was actually saved by Prince Philip, because on the night I was walking up and down the deck of the Britannia gnawing my fingernails. Prince Philip spotted me and said – “You seem to be worried young man. What's the problem?” So I explained and he said – “Well, if I go down and greet him at the bottom and bring him up, will that be all right?” I said – “Sir, you've just saved my life.” [Laughter] And that's what happened and everything went very well.

MM Good for Prince Philip.

MB Yes indeed, a great man.

MM How about the buying back of Kuwait's share of BP?

MB No, that was much later.

MM There's one minor thing about the State Visit. It was to establish Britain's status, to rescue the position that we had once enjoyed there, but we were getting towards the end of a long period of catastrophic decline economically in this country – strikes, inflation, the dead unburied, all kinds of terrible things going on. Did that impinge in any way?

MB Yes. I think the Kuwaitis were aware that we were going through a bad time. I think it impinged less than it actually had some years earlier when I had been in Paris. It was in Paris that a new British Leyland car was launched and there was a press launch somewhere, and the French press came back absolutely laughing themselves silly about this ridiculous car and what poor quality it was, and I was deeply shocked by that, because I'd always thought that British cars were the best in the world, or thereabouts.

MM They had been.

MB Had been. So this was a shock that we were really losing it industrially, but that was less apparent in Kuwait, except that we weren't winning many tenders for one reason or another, and I've already mentioned the patrol boats. Somehow we weren't getting the medals.

Head of Aviation, Maritime and Environment Department of the FCO, 1979

MB Well I went back to head a department called the Maritime Aviation and Environment Department, which was a very interesting department, in which quite a lot of freedom of action was left to the Head of Department. We also covered the Law of the Sea Conference which was taking place, but that didn't come directly within my responsibilities. There was a separate delegation headed at that time by John Powell-Jones, and they managed their own affairs, unless the conference was

actually in session, when we were required to back up occasionally and pull together a policy line for them. The aviation side was normally fairly routine. That mainly involved air services agreements. Air services can be quite tricky negotiations, and the one of the most difficult was always that with the United States, where a variation of the original Bermuda Two Agreement was in force. Britain was in the rather strange position that with the Americans we were resisting their attempts to bring about an 'open skies arrangement' – in other words absence of regulation – into our air services across the Atlantic. Whereas in dealing with the Europeans we were arguing the contrary – for an opening up of air services in the face of their tighter control of national systems. So that was our position on air services.

There was one very important function of the department which wasn't mentioned in its title and that was counter-terrorism policy, which later became a large department in its own right in the Foreign Office. At that time it was part of my department. We were engaged in drawing up contingency plans in Whitehall for dealing with terrorist incidents. At that time the most common terrorist incidents were aircraft hijackings, and Britain along with the other members of G7 had reached an agreement in Bonn, called the Bonn Declaration, in which Mrs Thatcher had played a leading part, which said that any country which became involved in promoting an aircraft hijacking would face reprisals by the G7 against its aviation interests. This was then tested by a hijacking of a Pakistan aircraft which was hijacked and then passed through Kabul, Afghanistan, where arms were put on board. It then flew to Syria and then to North Africa, I think Algiers, where the hijack was finally resolved. So the question then arose of implementing the Bonn Declaration, and I was told to get on with it. This was not entirely straightforward. First of all who was it to be applied against? Although Syria had not played a very positive role in the whole affair, it was thought impolitic to take aim at Syria because of its wider role in Middle East affairs, whereas Afghanistan had few friends. It was under the Russian occupation at the time, after the Russian invasion. So the aim was to apply the declaration against Afghanistan, and this we finally achieved, working closely with the Americans, in the face of a certain amount of apathy from other G7 partners. But it was finally implemented, and Ariana – the Afghan airline - was debarred from flying to Europe, which had been the purpose for which they had just bought or leased two Airbus aircraft. This incident has resonance shortly in my next appointment.

But the main terrorist incident of my time in that department was the siege of the Iranian Embassy, and this was very dramatic indeed. Curiously enough the officials in Whitehall concerned with terrorism happened to be holding a meeting in Church House to discuss the handling of the media during a terrorist incident when a note was passed in to the Chairman – my Home Office colleague Hayden Phillips – to tell him that something seemed to be going on at the Iranian Embassy, and that a policeman on the door had disappeared inside with what appeared to be a pistol held to his head. So we all went to action stations. The incident has been written up extensively so I won't go into it. There were some bizarre moments, like when it was suggested that, since the hijackers were Muslims, would it not be a good idea to get a Muslim leader to come down and tell them that they were behaving in an un-Islamic way. This led to my telephoning the Head of the Regents Park mosque, who was an Egyptian who became a good friend of mine later – Zaki Badawi – and saying to him – “You don't know who I am, and I can't tell you where I'm telephoning you from, but we think it would be a very good thing if you came down to the Iranian Embassy to try to persuade them to give up” – this was on a Bank Holiday. His reply was – “Are you mad? You want me to come down and stand in front of a bunch of terrorists and to tell them to come out with their hands up. No thank you.” [laughter]. That ploy didn't work.

MM Did he entirely refuse to?

MB Yes, very wisely. I could talk a lot about it, but ...

MM How was it resolved?

MB In the end it was resolved with the famous SAS raid, and the immortal pictures of the SAS shinning down the front of the Embassy, throwing stun grenades through the window, and then going in and dealing with it, and killing most of the hijackers. But the surreal moment was that we were in the Cabinet Office briefing room which at that time nobody was supposed to know the existence of, and what people were watching on the television monitors was snooker, because it was the weekend of the world snooker championship. There was this very calm sight and we knew at any

moment it was going to erupt into some hideous violence, and it did. Anyway all was well that ended well.

MM So that was a pretty eventful posting?

MB Yes, there was a very great deal of interest.

Head of South Asian Department of the FCO, 1981

MB In 1981 I was moved across to head the South Asian Department, not having served in the sub-continent before but I had a huge amount of family background in India.

MM Had your father served there?

MB Oh yes. My father, my grandfather, his father. So there was a lot of India in my blood. Actually I was the only member of my family who hadn't been there up to that point. It was a pleasure to be able to travel round the sub-continent on my familiarisation tour and on other visits. The relationship with India is the main one, and at that time it was a relationship between Margaret Thatcher and Indira Gandhi. Indira Gandhi came to London for the Festival of India, which was held at that time – a major event, and had important discussions with Margaret Thatcher.

MM Did they get on?

MB I think so, yes. They respected each other greatly. They were two powerful ladies, and they had a very productive relationship, in terms of agreeing British aid to India over a multiyear period, which was not normal Treasury practice, in exchange for a sympathetic attitude by the Indian government towards a big power project in which British industry was playing the leading role financed out of the aid programme.

MM Who was head of Pakistan at the time?

MB General Zia ul Haq, and I called on him at one point with the Minister of State in the Foreign Office, Lynda Chalker or Baroness Young – one succeeded the other. Anyway, I called on him in Pakistan, in Rawalpindi. I also made more than one visit up to Peshawar to the Afghan refugee camps in order to talk to the mujahadeen leaders. Our concern at the time was the Russian presence in Afghanistan, and finding ways to put pressure on them, both politically and on the ground in Afghanistan.

MM Were the Chinese in evidence?

MB Yes, they had an Embassy in Kabul. I went to Kabul as the Head of Department to visit staff at our Embassy there, headed by a Chargé d’Affaires, because we did not deal with the Afghan government, but our staff were hanging on in there. I said that there was an echo of the business of applying the Bonn Declaration against Afghanistan because I was unable to come out on the ‘plane that I was going to take back to New Delhi because snow fell, and after a few days of being stuck in Kabul and not achieving very much, the Chargé d’Affaires came to me and said – There’s a ‘plane leaving in half an hour for Delhi, but it’s an Afghan Airlines airbus or you can wait for a week for Air India. So I thought hard for about two seconds and took the Afghan ‘plane, hoping that they would not realise the role I had played in their previous problems. So that was that. I made a number of visits to Nepal. Also to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and toured India. One thing that started during my time was the Tamil trouble in Sri Lanka. The first flare up of that. We were somewhat at a loss as to how to respond in the Foreign Office, and there was even a bizarre suggestion that we ought to send in the Royal Navy, which I argued against. It didn’t seem to me to be a very sensible course of action. Fortunately we didn’t do that.

MM What in the world could they have done?

MB Who knows? Heaven knows!

MM Do you think that – this is slightly at a tangent – but do you think that the Indians are now in a position to do something about what’s happening in Afghanistan

and terrorism in those border areas? Those areas are after all the old traditional areas of interest to the British Raj?

MB Well they certainly have no influence on what's happening on the Afghan/Pakistan border, the old area of the Great Game. They have no influence over those tribes.

MM Any more than we have.

MB Any more than we have. No, that's a problem for the Pakistan government and the Afghan government. I think India could play more of a role in Afghanistan in support of the Karzai government, but I'm not really fully informed.

MM That was speculation. I should not really have introduced that idea. So after South Asian Department where you were Head of Department, you went on to a secondment?

Secondment to British Petroleum, 1984

MB Yes. I was called in by the PUS, Antony Acland, and he said that they wanted me to be a candidate for an important secondment to BP (British Petroleum). The company at Chairman level had asked for someone from the civil service to come across to head their Policy Review Unit in exchange for a BP official being seconded to Whitehall, and I was the Foreign Office candidate for this job, and was given it, and somebody from BP went into the Cabinet Office. This was quite a high level exchange in that the Policy Review Unit had a key role in BP. In fact it was a unique organisation as far as I could make out, in any large company, of a unit, which was not part of the normal planning process, which is very much what a planning department does. It was apart from that, and it was supposed to engage in blue skies thinking – think the unthinkable – or at least that's what they told me when I went for the interview. When I then turned up for the job and I said – And now can you tell me what I'm really supposed to do, they said – Oh didn't they tell you? Blue skies thinking. Think the unthinkable. I realised they had no clear idea what they wanted for this unit at all, which was quite testing. I had about eight analysts from different

parts of this very large and diverse group working with me, and it took some time to draw up a work plan which we finally did, and it was greeted by howls of horror from the 38th floor – Oh, but you can't do that. It's my baby. I'm not having anybody touch it. That's not relevant. That's been done before, and so on and so forth. So I said – Relax everybody, we'll do it again. And we narrowed it down to four or five projects which were so opaquely phrased, that no-one could tell exactly where we were going to. The most significant problem was BP as a conglomerate, because they didn't like the term conglomerate, but they clearly were a conglomerate, so I said – I think you'll find it helpful if you know what conglomerates are; what distinguishes a good one from a bad one, and how you should go about it. However, I won't go into that.

Minister and Deputy Commandant, British Military Government, Berlin, 1985

MB It was extremely interesting, and after my time there I probably knew more about working for big industry than anyone else in the Foreign Office, so they managed to find a post for me in which that was totally irrelevant, which was as the British Minister and Deputy Commandant in Berlin where I went in 1985. This was the start of seven years in Berlin. I was the last person to hold that job – Minister and Deputy Commandant in the British Military Government, until the post ended with the reunification of Germany in 1990. I wasn't happy with the way it was structured in Berlin. I had thought a bit about the structure of organisations in my BP time and the fact that the Deputy Commandant, so-called, didn't even sign his own telegrams. The Commandant whose name appeared at the bottom, had nothing to do with the telegrams. It seemed to me this could lead to some misunderstanding. So I argued for a re-organisation, but this wasn't really a very welcome suggestion, so that was put on ice. It finally did happen but after the Wall came down and in the short period between then and German reunification.

The position in Berlin at the time was that the Allies were doing their traditional job of providing garrisons, providing a sense of security for Berlin, and enabling it to develop its economy and to be a showcase for western values and for capitalism. The geographical position of BMG was that it was in the middle of the GDR surrounded by 380,000 Soviet troops and a group of Soviet Forces. But the Berliners themselves

felt little threat at that time. Gorbachev had come to power in Moscow and it was the period of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. But in Berlin nothing altered. As I said, the Berliners felt little threat and this meant that they were beginning to be a bit restless about some of the inconveniences that arose as a result of the allied presence there, some of them very minor inconveniences, like tanks rumbling through the streets when the Allies held their annual parade – the Allied Forces Day parade, and allied training in the woods. As far as the British were concerned we had a training city, training units fighting in a built-up area at a place called Ruhleben, and this of course created a certain amount of noise for people living around. And that kind of thing was beginning to grate with the Berliners, so that they needed reminding that these were small prices to pay for the overall benefit of having the Allies keep them safe, and we weren't on the whole greatly helped by some of the Berlin politicians, including the governing mayor himself, who would occasionally blur the finer points of what was called Berlin status. For example, 1987 was the 750th anniversary of Berlin, and Berlin became the European City of Culture. The governing mayor was treating the GDR mayor of East Berlin as if he were an equal, whereas according to the fine print of the Allied conception of the city, there was only one governing mayor and that was himself. However, these were relatively minor matters. In 1987, which was a big year for Berlin, all three Allies sent their heads of state to give support and/or encouragement to the Berliners. The Queen came to take the salute at her birthday parade, and at the same time delivered a speech to an invited audience in the Palace of Charlottenburg, in which she expressed the hope that in time Berlin's tradition of being a city of tolerance would come to the fore, and a united Berlin which at present was a symbol of the division of Europe, would become a symbol of its unity. Good and prescient words.

Rather more attention was paid understandably to the speech made by President Reagan in the same year. He delivered his speech in front of the Brandenburg Gate. In his speech he called for Mr Gorbachev to: 'Open up this gate, and Mr Gorbachev – Tear down this wall'. And he also proposed that the Four Powers should get together to modernise the air services arrangements for Berlin, which were frozen in aspic from the end of the war. That is to say there were three air corridors. Aircraft could not fly above ten thousand feet because that was the height that aircraft flew at in 1945, and no airlines other than the three allied airlines were able to use the corridors.

Those discussions were overtaken by the fall of the Wall. But the point I am making is that there was some underlying friction between the Germans and the Allies over the allied presence in Berlin. The Germans felt that rhetorical statements like Reagan's were provocative and did little to improve the situation on the ground for Berliners. The Allies, particularly the Americans, felt that pressure had to be kept up if there were to be any change.

There was an incident in 1988 which turned out to be significant in providing a precedent when the Wall first opened. That was over an area called the Lenne Triangle. The Berlin Wall was built in the middle of the city in what we called the Soviet Sector. But it was not at the absolute edge of the sector. It was built some way back, so that the builders could do their work. There therefore was a strip of land on the western side between the Wall and the actual legal boundary of the Soviet Sector known in German as the *Unterbaugebiet*. This included the Lenne Triangle, which was more than just a strip of land. It was a triangle of land adjacent to the Potsdamerplatz in the centre of Berlin. In June 1988, the hippies of Berlin realised that if they were to set up camp in the Lenne Triangle and do the things that hippies do, the Berlin police could not really touch them because it was legally part of the Soviet Sector. Eventually we decided that the situation was getting out of hand and we would tell the Soviets that we would take action. For "status" reasons we only dealt with the Soviets over Berlin – not with the GDR authorities. We told the Soviets to tell the GDR authorities that we were going to deal with this situation, exceptionally, by instructing the West Berlin police to go in and remove the hippies. So that's what happened. The hippies climbed over the Wall and were given breakfast on the other side and then came back through Checkpoint Charlie. Although the incident was minor and fairly comic it created a precedent which turned out to be important at a later stage, as I shall come to.

In the summer of 1989, before the opening of the Wall, it was evident that things were stirring around Berlin. There was the Solidarity movement in Poland. The turning point came when the Hungarian government opened its border to the West. East Germans were then able to go to Hungary, and then out to the west through Hungary to Austria. Some had also gone into Czechoslovakia and taken refuge in the German Embassy in Prague, and had been brought out by train organised by Hans Dietrich

Genscher, the Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic. Then Honeker, the East German leader responsible for the building of the Wall, resigned on grounds of ill-health, or so it was given out, and was replaced by another member of the Politburo, Egon Krenze. And what happened in September was that year there were a series of vigils in the Nikolai Kirche in Leipzig – after which people would come out from the church with candles and parade silently through the streets of Leipzig. The numbers of people doing that were growing. After the massacre at Tiananmen Square in China there was a very large demonstration in Leipzig in early October which was the critical moment at which the GDR authorities could have reacted with force like the Chinese did in Tiananmen Square. But they found that the Soviets would not back them in taking those measures, and although it was touch and go, finally the demonstration went ahead unharmed. After that, the pace of events gathered speed. The next massive demonstration was in Berlin itself, at the Alexanderplatz in East Berlin, and this was broadcast live on television, so that sitting in West Berlin we could see a huge crowd of people with placards, which made it plain that they were not docile communists, but demanding change, with the very powerful slogan *Wir sind das Volk* – We are the People. Communist governments are of course supposed to be the governments of the people, and so when under the slogan ‘we are the people’ people called for fundamental changes in the system, including changes in travel, this was something that could not easily be ignored.

That brings us to the night that the Wall finally opened. It was basically an accident. A GDR Politburo member, Gunther Schabowski, was giving a press conference in which he was announcing new changes to the travel restrictions. His announcement did not amount to open borders; it was something rather short of that. But when he had given the details, he was asked a question by a British journalist: ‘So when do these new regulations apply?’ He was not expecting the question and looked at his notes to find the answer and said: ‘Well, straight away I suppose.’ At that point the East Berliners who were of course watching this on television, made in large numbers for the crossing point at Bornholmer Strasse in Berlin. They turned up there and said to the border guard: ‘There is a new travel regulation and we’re allowed through.’ The guards were unsighted and rang the guard station for instructions. The reply from the officer in charge was, in effect, ‘Well I don’t know anything about it, but if they say they’re allowed through, you’d better let them through.’ That was how it

happened. And so in the middle of the night they started to stream through at the Bornholmer crossing point and this was broadcast throughout the world.

The Allies responded firstly by agreeing swiftly to issue a statement welcoming the opening of the Wall, and then of course monitoring what was going on. The British garrison had a band playing at the crossing point through the Wall next day – the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, with their goat – their mascot – and providing NAAFI tea, and this went down very well. The Soviet Union was totally dismayed by what had happened and a message came from President Gorbachev to the allied heads of government saying: For heavens sake, you'd better make sure that nothing goes wrong in Berlin, because it's a very explosive situation. That evening the three allied ambassadors and ministers and commandants met in Berlin to discuss what they could actually do in practice to prevent any incident occurring. That's when we were able to think back to the Lenne Triangle affair of the previous year, which I referred to, and instruct the Berlin police to go into the strip by the Wall in order to keep order, and prevent anybody, for example, throwing bottles at the East German border guards standing on top of the Wall, with the obvious risk of retaliation. So that's what happened, and the situation was defused in that way. The East German border guards then disappeared from the top of the Wall, and then the Wall started to have holes made in it all over the place. A day or so later the great cellist Rostropovich came and played his cello beside the Wall. First of all he couldn't find a chair to sit on and went to the nearest house and said – "I'm Rostropovich. Can you lend me a chair?"!

From the allied point of view, we were obviously trying to assess where this was all leading, and it part of the answer became clear to me from observing the great crowds in West Berlin on the first weekend after the Thursday of the Opening. Crowds were coming over from the East and were being given their greeting money of 100 Deutsch marks by the banks - *begrüßungsgeld*. They were going shopping with that. Of course it didn't go very far, so there was the spectacle of families with their noses pressed to the windows of the glittering shops in the Ku Damm, with the children saying – I want that toy, and mother saying – I want that outfit, and father saying – I want that car, and it was clear that there was going to be a huge impetus in the GDR and in East Berlin to get the Deutschmark, and this was what was going to drive the

move towards German reunification. That was what we reported. Not a welcome message at the time.

MM Indeed, but extremely important all the same.

MB Yes.

MM You were Deputy Commandant. Who was the Commandant?

MB For most of my time there it was Major General Patrick Brooking, who, as I mentioned at the start, had been at the same prep school as me.

MM So he was a military man, and he was responsible for military affairs. You were Deputy Commandant but responsible for political affairs?

MB Yes. We were of equal rank.

MM Oh were you?

MB Yes. Two star equivalent. And then in the last year he was succeeded by Major General Robert Corbett.

MM Did the Ministry of Defence take the lead on this situation?

MB No. It was the Foreign Office. The Commandant reported on military matters to the Ministry of Defence, but most matters in Berlin were not strictly military. They were political or military-political.

MM I'm slightly puzzled that you had the position of Deputy Commandant when you had actually got the more important job.

MB We had jobs of equal importance. I didn't object to the title "Deputy Commandant" because the legitimacy of the Allies' position in Berlin rested on the Allies' inalienable right of Occupation gained by their victory in the war. It was right

therefore that the senior military figure had primacy in the formal structure. My concern was that in the Foreign Office not everyone could be expected to understand this. Foreign Office telegrams, as you know, always carry the signature of the head of post. But in this case when I proffered advice from Berlin, which might be on some very important matter, it was not my name at the bottom of the telegram, but the General's. So I found that curious and really rather inefficient at the end of the day. The Americans had abolished this system back in 1948.

MM 1948?

MB They replaced the American Military Government with the American Mission in Berlin under the Minister, my US colleague, and he signed his own telegrams in the normal way, and everybody knew what to make of it.

MM Was there a French Mission there?

MB Oh yes. We had the three Sectors, the three garrisons, the three commandants and the three ministers, and two Military Governments and a US Mission. The commandants and the ministers formed the allied government of Berlin, the Allied Kommandatura. The Allied Kommandatura had among its functions the implementation of the Quadripartite Agreement of 1971, which was really the bible for the allies in Berlin. The key phrase in that was that West Berlin was not part of the FRG and was not governed by it – not part of it and not governed by it. So, laws which were passed in Bonn in the Bundestag had to be screened by the Allies before they could be promulgated in Berlin, to ensure that they were consistent with Allied status, did not impinge on the rights of the Allies and were consistent with the Quadripartite Agreement. For that purpose we each had a legal adviser and they formed a legal committee and the Allied Kommandatura at the end of the day would make the decision on authorising the laws. The Allied Kommandatura met every month under a rotating chairmanship, so there was always one of the three allies in the chair, which meant that for that month they were in the chair for all the various committees – the Legal Committee, the Public Safety Committee, the Political Advisers Committee, the Ministers Committee, the Commandants – the chairman ally was in the chair for all of those. The Commandants and Ministers also had a monthly

meeting with the Governing Mayor. The opening of the Wall was actually in an American month, so the US was the chairman ally.

Let us just talk a bit about what the Allied Kommandatura did in the year following the opening of the Wall and leading up to German reunification. It was clear that the Allied status would change. The commandants would have to leave because they were the symbol of Allied authority in Berlin. But the brigadiers, one star generals, who commanded the three brigades of the garrison under them in each sector remained at their commands. During the year many changes took place. One very high profile change was the end of Checkpoint Charlie – the famous Checkpoint Charlie. For the ceremony there was a gathering of six foreign ministers – the foreign ministers of the four allied powers, including the Soviet Union, Shevardnadze, and the two German foreign ministers since at that time there were still two German states. So there were six foreign ministers, and lots of speeches. Douglas Hurd made the amusing remark at the end of his speech that it was time for Charlie to come in from the cold – an echo of John le Carre’s spy novel of Berlin, *“The Spy Who Came in from the Cold”*. Then the Allied control hut at Checkpoint Charlie was lifted up and put on a truck and taken off to be the centre point of the museum which had been set up – the Museum of the Allies – in the American sector of Berlin. It is still there, and well worth visiting.

As the actual date for German reunification approached, the allies decided that the Allied Kommandatura would hold its final meeting on the day before German reunification. The concluding business was to write a letter to the Governing Mayor saying that we, the Allies, felt proud of the role we had played over all the years of our authority over Berlin in keeping Berlin secure and free, and that we were now handing over our responsibilities, and that our job was done. That was the final meeting of the Allied Kommandatura. The three allied flags outside the building were lowered, we took the letter down to the Berlin parliament and the Berlin senate and handed it over in the presence of Willy Brandt. It was a nice touch on his part that this great former Governing Mayor and Chancellor of Germany was present for the occasion. And then at midnight that night Germany became a reunited state. I couldn’t help noticing that among the tunes the band played in front of the Reichstag building was Land of Hope and Glory!

In the year's interval there had been crucial negotiations – 4 + 2 negotiations – to establish the framework within which Germany would become reunited. These were in effect the final negotiations to end the post-war arrangements. They provided for formalisation of the borders of Poland, and an agreement that reunited Germany would be allowed to continue in NATO.

MM Momentous times.

MB Momentous negotiations.

MM Just a small point. I remember well that the British Zone in Germany was mainly the industrial Ruhr heartlands and the American zone was basically Bavaria and southern Germany. What bit did we give the French? I'm putting that as neutrally as I can?

MB The French zone was around Baden Baden – the opposite side of the Rhine from Strasbourg, and the French Sector in Berlin was the north part of West Berlin, which included Tegel which became the airport of West Berlin. The American Sector lay in the south of the city and their airport was Tempelhof. The British Sector was in the middle and included the Brandenburg Gate and the Reichstag, and our airport was Royal Air Force Gatow, which played a major role in the airlift.

MM Well that seems to deal with that interesting period. Have you left anything out?

MB Just the occasion when I risked provoking a serious international incident! A few months before the Wall fell, there was an escape attempt across the River Spree, just by the Reichstag building. Three young East Berliners were involved. The attention of a GDR patrol boat was distracted by other things and the three managed to swim across the river and two of them, including a pregnant woman, got out okay, but the third couldn't manage it in time. The patrol boat had by then woken up, and came across and took him off the bank, a soldier from the boat put his foot on the bank in the Western sector in the process and happened to be photographed doing it by a passing British tourist. The third East Berliner was taken away of course, and dealt

with. But we had the evidence that he had reached the western sectors and therefore his removal had been illegal.

MM The chap swimming across?

MB Yes – on that evidence, the Western foreign ministers made a big fuss with Shevardnadze and demanded that he be returned to the Western sectors. In my mission I had the thought that we should do something about the bank, at that point, so that if anybody else tried to make break for it, they could clamber out safely. So we agreed with the Senate that they would install some ladders into the water at intervals along the bank, and fix a rope along the top connecting them, which they did. The Daily Mail photographed it. The Foreign Office, I have to say, then got cold feet because the legal advisers said it was all right about the ladders on the bank, but they were not certain about the ladders after they entered the water. They were not certain to whom the water belonged, whether it was strictly in the Western sectors or not. So it was proposed that we should cut off the ladders at the water level! I was away on leave at the time and thought this was insanity. We would be a laughing stock. So we left the ladders as they were. But the GDR became furious about the ladders, and were making a great fuss. Finally my opposite number, the Soviet Minister in East Berlin, made a very serious oral and written protest saying that unless we removed the ladders the Soviet Union could not be held responsible for the consequences. I looked at this document and said that I could not believe that the Soviet Union, a great power, should object to the installation of some ladders which have been put there to enable pregnant women and children who might fall into the river from climbing out safely. He said: ‘I have not heard of pregnant women or children falling into the river’. But I looked at him hard and judged that he was just doing this on instructions without having his heart in it. This, I felt, was not going to lead to World War III, and so I reported that. Fortunately the Wall opened about three months later and my judgment was not put to the test! But that’s an example which shows you how the status of Berlin was argued over.

MM Did you ever get into East Berlin?

Head of British Embassy Berlin Office, 1990-92

MB Oh yes. We had complete right of access to East Berlin, but not to East Germany. Personally I didn't go much. I didn't like it. But we then had a bit of a to-do with the Foreign Office, because after the Wall opened and the changes took place, all the West Berliners were streaming out into what was still the GDR to see the places they had not been able to visit for many years. But in the Berlin Mission (as it had finally become) we were not given permission. So we had to wait until shortly before German reunification, before being permitted to do so. Then the status changed again and it became my task to combine the three Diplomatic Service Missions in Berlin into one – BMG, the Embassy in East Berlin, and the Consulate General in West Berlin. The consolidated post was given the title of British Embassy Berlin Office. I was the head of that for two years. So then of course, it was my duty to go out into the whole of the former GDR which was now my territory under the authority of the ambassador in Bonn. These travels were the interesting part of the job.

MM Indeed. So what did you see?

MB I saw a place that had to an extent lost confidence in its future; a place where West Germans were coming over during the week to run things, and then going back home at the weekend, fulfilling a sort of colonial role. But there were plenty of opportunities for helping. For example, I went to Gotha in Thuringia, which has a great castle, where Prince Albert grew up. And I called on the young mayor who invited me to lunch in the Rathauskeller and said – “I have really just become mayor because there was an election and my friends and I decided to stand. We all got elected but I don't actually know what I'm supposed to be doing. Can you advise me on what a mayor is supposed to do?” So I sent him on a quick course in Britain on what a mayor does. As regards the great castle at Gotha, the Duke of Kent led a trade mission out to the former GDR, and we decided to go to Gotha and give a dinner in the castle for the prominent people of Thuringia. The impressive curator arranged a delightful exhibition of memorabilia of Prince Albert's early years in Gotha in the castle. So that was a case of the Royal family coming back to its roots in a sense.

There was much to do in developing political, economic and cultural ties between the UK and what had become the New Laender of the Federal Republic.

MM Did you have another State Visit?

MB Yes, there was a State Visit by the Queen and Prince Philip in 1992, which was her first visit to a reunited Germany. She was able to walk through the Brandenburg Gate and then visit the former GDR for the first time. It was a very significant and symbolic visit. She also went to visit Potsdam for the first time. Potsdam is where Frederick the Great is buried, so she visited his tomb, but she also visited the tombs of the Emperor Frederick and the Empress Frederick, who was the daughter of Queen Victoria, in their mausoleum in the grounds of Sans Souci. But there was a point of controversy in the visit to Dresden. In discussing the visit in advance the question arose whether the Queen should visit Dresden. The German President, Richard von Weisäcker was quite reluctant. It was a bit risky. It was actually a prominent German television journalist, who knew Britain well and had helped present aspects of Britain to German television audiences, who said that She had got to go to Dresden, or it would look as if she were running away from the issue of the bombing of Dresden in February 1945. It was so decided, but it was to be a short visit, purely for the purpose of a service of reconciliation in the Johanneskirche in Dresden, and avoiding controversy and avoiding being seen to visit or pay any particular attention to the Frauenkirche – the great Saxon protestant church of Dresden – which had been destroyed in the air raid, and had been left untouched as a pile of rubble as a reminder of the “atrocities of the Allies”. And so that was agreed. It didn’t actually go off as intended. When the Queen landed at Dresden airport from Berlin her accompanying party had gone ahead to the church where the service was to take place. I realised that there would therefore be nobody with her on the political side when she landed and drove through Dresden. So I inserted myself into the convoy after her landing at Dresden airport. The drive through Dresden was quite eerie because there were lots of Soviet soldiers standing around and lots of Dresdeners, but they didn’t seem to know whether they were supposed to clap or show any sign of approval or enthusiasm. They were very interested, but it was a silent drive. And then the German President, von Weisäcker, probably unwittingly, went back on our understanding and actually stopped the car in which they were both travelling at the Frauenkirche ruins, and

draw her attention to them, but fortunately neither of them got out of the car or anything like that. However when we arrived at the Johanneskirche eggs were thrown at the car which was deeply embarrassing and infuriated von Weizsäcker. But we went into the service; it was a beautiful service with the choir of Coventry cathedral singing, Prince Philip reading the lesson in German and von Weizsäcker reading a lesson in English. It was a beautiful service of reconciliation. By the time we came out the demonstrators had of course been dealt with and all was calm and peaceful, but it was a bad moment. We went on by the German fast train – not yet going at full speed – from Dresden to Leipzig, and in Leipzig it was a different story. There was great enthusiasm. We visited the Nicolaikirche, which, as I told you, was the centre of the candle-lit vigils in the summer of 1989, and the pastor explained to the Queen what had happened, and how it had gone on. And then there was a walkabout in the square outside where there was a great deal of enthusiasm. So that was very happy.

MM During your time as Head of the Berlin office, were you theoretically part of the British Embassy in Bonn?

MB Oh yes. I was under the British Ambassador in Bonn throughout my time in Berlin. First of all the reporting line from BMG was to the Embassy in Bonn, and to the Foreign Office in parallel, and in Bonn there was the coordination of the three allies, plus the Germans, in the so-called Bonn group, and that was where things were decided as to what was to happen in Berlin, because the Germans obviously had an essential input as well. And then as Head of the Berlin office - the Ambassador had a residence in Berlin from the very beginning, from the end of the war, just round the corner from my own residence, and it was in his residence that the Queen and Prince Philip stayed when they came on that State Visit, and it's now the full-time residence of the Ambassador now that the embassy has moved up to Berlin. Incidentally when the Queen visited Berlin in 1992 I conducted her to lay the foundation stone of the new Embassy, which stands there now.

MM It's apparently a wonderful building?

MB It's a matter of taste. Great care has been taken over the public areas and it stands favourable comparison with the French and US embassies which, somewhat

later than ours, have been rebuilt on their old sites near the Brandenburg Gate. It's quite ironic that Neville Henderson in his book "*Failure of a Mission*" wrote that it was very inconvenient in the pre-war British Embassy that it was folded into the crook of the arm – so to speak – of the adjacent Adlon Hotel, and the cooking smells of the Adlon Hotel were very disagreeable, permeating the Embassy. The Embassy is once again next to the Adlon Hotel, rebuilt on its own site, and the Adlon Hotel is rebuilt on its old site. A very splendid hotel and I don't think there's a problem with cooking smells!

MM Did you by chance ever see a film done by the former East Germans in German about life in the GDR called "*People Like Us*"? It was an extremely moving picture about the tragedy of the Communist system.

MB No I didn't see that one.

MM I think that probably deals with Germany, does it?

MB Yes.

MM You were not involved in any way, I suppose, in the great saga of Mrs Thatcher and her rather unfortunate comments about the reunification of Germany?

MB Not directly, but when the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, visited Berlin straight after the first opening in the Wall – fairly new as Foreign Secretary – he was in the embarrassing position that he was having to follow the negative line coming from Number Ten on German reunification, and so that was quite awkward. But I did have an awkward moment with Mrs Thatcher over Rudolf Hess. Rudolf Hess died in August 1989 and once he died, as the one remaining prisoner in the allied war prison, the agreement was between the allies, that Spandau prison would be razed to the ground, and in its place, as it was in the British Sector, a NAAFI would be built. Mrs Thatcher came on a visit to Berlin shortly afterwards and as we were driving to the city centre from RAF Gatow, I pointed out to her where Spandau Prison had stood and mentioned that the plan was to build a NAAFI on the site, and she said that she thought that was a great mistake because it was such a ill-omened place. This left me

in a very awkward position whether I should report her remarks so that the decision could be reviewed, or turn a Nelsonian blind eye to it, so to speak. I decided to take advice and was advised to report them, and did report them and so the matter was reviewed but no change was made to the plans and the Naafi was built. I don't know what it is now, probably a supermarket. I could talk a lot about Hess, but I don't think you want to hear that.

Assistant Under Secretary of State for Middle East and North Africa in the FCO, 1993

MB We now come to my period as Assistant Under Secretary of State (AUSS) for the Middle East and North Africa, which was quite short because I was coming up against the buffer of the minimum period of three years before retirement at 60 in order to qualify for a final ambassadorial post. So my time as AUSS was a very interesting period but only about eighteen months. On the Arab-Israel question I had always taken the view that it was a tragic situation, in the literal sense, with right and wrong on both sides. I did not take the narrowly pro-Palestinian position of some of my colleagues. As it happened, during my time as AUSS the "Oslo breakthrough" took place in the negotiations between the two sides. We, the UK, had been part of the troika of EU states attending the General Assembly in New York and visiting all the delegations who were supposed to be working through the Madrid process, set up by the Madrid Conference to bring about a settlement. But these were very desultory negotiations.

Then during the Spring Bank Holiday in 1993 I was telephoned by Christopher Long, who was our Ambassador in Egypt and who happened to be back in London, to say that a Palestinian contact of his, Nabil Sha'ath, was passing through London from Oslo and would like to meet someone from the Foreign Office. So Christopher and I met Sha'ath over breakfast on the bank holiday in a Kensington hotel. Nabil Sha'ath proceeded to tell us the astonishing story of the negotiations that had been taking place in Oslo, none of which we knew about, and the progress that had been made agreeing to a two stage peace agreement. This was astonishing news, and I went back of course and reported it in the Foreign Office and we then had to adapt our Middle East policy. I took the view that, whatever the Oslo agreement might lead to, there

were elements in it, such as PLO recognition of the State of Israel, which were irreversible and it was therefore of historic importance. Also, up to that point we had, for example, been quite reluctant to receive Palestinian visitors, PLO visitors. Well we now had to receive Arafat himself because he was clearly going to be received everywhere else, and so a visit by Yasser Arafat took place and he duly called on the Prime Minister. We also arranged a day-long seminar in the Foreign Office bringing together the Palestinian and Jewish community leaders in Britain to discuss a general subject - the economy of the region - including a good lunch. Bringing them together at this time was a positive move which we and they found very worthwhile.

I also travelled in the region, to nearly all our posts, and called on Arafat in Tunis. I went back to Sudan, my old posting; nothing much seemed to have changed. I arranged a Middle East Heads of Mission Conference for the first time in Tel Aviv, which we'd never done before. This in itself was quite a breakthrough.

On other matters, Iran was a particular problem because of the *fatwa* that had been declared by Ayatollah Khomeini on Salman Rushdie. I found myself the Foreign Office contact for Salman Rushdie and his advisers, and when there were signs that the atmosphere in Tehran had improved a bit the decision was taken by the Foreign Secretary that I should go to Teheran and actually talk to the Iranians direct about the fatwa to see if something could be achieved, which I did. The talks were perfectly cordial and professional, and we made a certain amount of progress, but we weren't able to settle it there and then. It wasn't the right time, and it wasn't the right government in Teheran. But they did say that the Iranian government would do nothing to send commandoes, as they put it, to kill Salman Rushdie, so this was progress of a sort, but it did not enable Rushdie to come out and lead a normal life. That only came five years later when Robin Cook was Secretary of State and the reformists were in power in Teheran.

As regards Syria I visited Damascus with Douglas Hurd and we had a lengthy interview with Hafiz al Assad, the President of Syria, at which we heard at first hand his intractable line on not being prepared to give up a single inch of Syrian territory to enable there to be some kind of compromise agreement with Israel. That meant that the so-called "Syrian track" of the overall peace negotiations, which was under

discussion at the time, was not going anywhere very much. Finally I accompanied Prince Charles on a Gulf tour on the Royal Yacht.

MM That must have been exceedingly pleasant?

MB Yes it was. Prince Charles was very cordially received because he had shortly before made an important speech in Oxford at which he had said in effect said Islam had made significant contributions to world civilisation and had held out the hand of friendship. This had gone down very well in the Gulf and he was very cordially received. Very good fun. And on a domestic note, this was a time when the Foreign Office was re-organising itself. The areas of responsibility of the AUSSs were being designated as discrete “commands” for administrative purposes to co-ordinate the distribution of resources to the posts within them. So I was engaged in setting up the Middle-East Command.

Posting as HMA British Embassy Prague, 1994-97

MM So finally you get Prague.

MB Finally I get to Prague, my final posting in 1994. This was really coming full circle, because as I said when I was married in 1967 I was told I could never serve behind the Iron Curtain, and certainly never in Prague, but in the end it became the elegant and obvious place for me actually to serve my final posting.

MM And your wife must have liked it?

MB It was very nice for my wife, and she was able to discover, so to speak, her family connections which was also very helpful for me because it gave me Czech people I could talk to, and discover how they really thought about things. It was an important time in the progress of the Czech Republic, which had split off from Slovakia about eighteen months before I arrived. I was the first Ambassador whose responsibilities only covered the Czech Republic, and not Slovakia, and I was not accredited to Slovakia. But it was a very interesting time because the Czechs felt that they belonged in the Western family of nations, and when you looked at it, they had a

very good claim to that. Czechoslovakia had actually been the only democracy to the east of the Rhine under Masaryk and Benes between the wars, and they had been let down, to put it no more strongly, at the Munich Conference in 1938 and abandoned to Hitler. So they felt that it was right and proper that they should join the Western community and that meant joining NATO, and joining the European Union. At the beginning of my time in Prague there was some reticence about this on our side about letting central European countries into NATO, because there was a school of thought, to which I did not subscribe, that this could be provocative to the Russians, that it could destabilise our attempt to forge a better relationship with post-communist Russia, and it would be unwise to extend NATO and the Article 5 guarantee to these countries.

MM What is the Article 5 guarantee?

MB The Article 5 guarantee is that if any member of NATO is attacked all the other members of the alliance go to their aid. Right now there is the very live issue with regard to Georgia and Ukraine and whether they should be allowed to join NATO. But as regards the EU there wasn't that reticence. We were running a very effective aid programme for the central European states called the Know How Fund. The Fund was not giving them large amounts of money, but it was giving them targeted technical assistance to help in the transition from a command to a free economy. So we helped, for example, in setting up their financial structures, in bringing about privatisation of their industries, in advising their armed forces and in improving the effectiveness of some of the ministries and the judiciary. We had a lot to offer in all these areas and we were giving help. The political situation in the country was slightly complicated by the fact that the President, Vaclav Havel, did not see eye to eye with the Prime Minister, Vaclav Klaus. Havel was promoting the policy of rejoining the west, and he was very effective in receiving visitors and explaining to them the importance of that. Klaus was concerned with the economy, was sceptical about the advantages of both NATO and the EU, and has remained sceptical about the EU to this day. But it was Havel's line which won the day as regards NATO, while I was there, helped by the fact that the US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright was of Czech extraction. She was therefore able to promote the cause, and so in 1997 before I left there was a grand and emotional ceremony in which Madeleine Albright

came and spoke and welcomed the Czech Republic into the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance. The negotiations with the EU were still going on when I left.

Arrangements were quite informal in Prague at the time as regards contacts with the Czech ministries. The other leading Western ambassadors and I, for example, had a discrete regular meeting with the Deputy Foreign Minister in what we called the Bez Kravaty club – *bez kravaty* means no ties – which meant we would meet in a restaurant chosen discreetly by whomever was the host for the evening, and we would talk entirely informally about what we thought the Czechs needed to be doing in order to win more supporters in the West. And the Czech minister would talk about what he felt about things. It was good way of oiling the wheels of diplomacy.

MM Indeed, essential.

MB The British Ambassadors in the four Visegrad countries – Visegrad was a body in which Havel had had a hand in setting up early in the 1990s consisting of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic – or at that time Czechoslovakia – and then the Czech Republic and Slovakia – four countries, who were supposed to be joined together to negotiate together their entry into Western institutions. Visegrad fell into abeyance while I was in Prague, partly because of the opposition of Klaus, but we – the four British ambassadors in these countries – would get together informally in each other's capitals in rotation to discuss what was happening in each other's territories, and get a good feel for central Europe as a whole. That was very helpful.

MM In each other's capitals?

MB We took it in turn to host a meeting in Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Bratislava.

MM Did you also have meetings of Heads of EU missions?

MB Oh yes, in Prague we had regular meetings of the EU ambassadors and NATO meetings too. The EU ambassadors would invite Czech leaders to lunch and informal discussions and our guests would include the Prime Minister himself, Klaus, and other

ministers, and occasionally President Havel. These meetings were usually very productive because the Czechs were very open and frank with us.

MM It must have been a very pleasant posting.

MB It was a very pleasant posting, yes. Very pleasant indeed, and it ended as almost all my postings seemed to, with yet another and my final State Visit. This one was entirely my responsibility, and it went very well indeed. President Havel was a very good host. It was at the end of March, so one couldn't rely on good weather and the significance of it was first of all, how we dealt with the Munich issue, because this had always been a cloud hanging over the relationship.

MM Munich in 1938?

MB Neville Chamberlain had abandoned the Czechs to their fate in 1938. So what we did was to face up to the issue by including a passage into the Queen's speech at the State Dinner on the first night, which was an absolutely magnificent affair in the Spanish Hall of Prague Castle, and the relevant phrase was – "I understand and sympathise with the feelings of the Czech people over the Munich Agreement." That was all. It wasn't an apology. It was a statement of sympathy and understanding. And it was enough. to draw the line under the whole issue, as far as the Czechs were concerned.

President Havel was very keen that the Queen should go to Brno – the second town in the Czech Republic - because that is where the Czech Constitutional Court is, and he wanted the Queen visit it and bless the new democratic constitution, so that was of great significance. He accompanied her himself which he would never normally do as Head of State, and it was a really good visit, because the weather was brilliant and the Queen was given a marvellous reception. When we drove round the corner into the main square in Brno, it was heaving with people. People were hanging off chimneys to get a view of the Queen and as we drove past the hospital the surgeons were out on the balcony to watch wearing their green robes and masks. I wondered, what about the patients? The visit ended on a real high note, as far as I was concerned, with the Queen and Prince Philip and the royal party coming for lunch in the Embassy as the

guests of my wife and myself. As I was approaching retirement I felt that this was the climax of my career.

How should I sum it up? I feel I was lucky in its unusual variety and involvement in some significant moments. To have played some part, however small, in the positive legacy that Britain left behind in the Gulf, in the fostering of a new mood in our relations with France after General de Gaulle's departure, in the drama of the final years of the Allied responsibility for the freedom of Berlin and in helping the Czechs to achieve their rightful position in the western family of nations, these are the achievements whose memories I have carried into retirement. Although there is less to show for my time in the Middle East I was again lucky that my time as AUSS coincided with one of the few hopeful moments in the peace process.

I feel very proud and grateful to have been given such marvellous postings and to have had such experiences, and also to have made such good friends.

MM Thank you very much.

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