

## **BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

**Recollections of Mrs Ethel Cox, recorded by Syd Maddicott on 8 August 2016 and transcribed by Suzanne Ricketts**

SM: This is Syd Maddicott, talking to Ethel Cox who formerly worked for the Foreign Office.

EC: In Ankara, at the Embassy, not in London. I was under the Foreign Office because I wasn't a local.

SM: Of course not, no. So you were sent out from London?

EC: That's right.

SM: Tell me. Where were you born?

EC: I was born in Smyrna, Izmir. We always used to call it Smyrna. Izmir is the Turkish word for it. So I was born on the 17th of September 1912 in Izmir. I was four years old when my poor father died and, do you know Syd, I still miss him today. I was only four years old but the memory is still there. He used to play with us, all sorts of different things ... and then suddenly he died of consumption because the Turks, in the 1914 war - they were with Germany, weren't they?

SM: Yes.

EC: And the Turks used to go to all the foreign houses, specially the British and the French, to take the men out as prisoners of war. My father had two rifles because he and his friends used to go hunting and he had them in the wardrobe. The first thing he thought if anyone came in and saw the rifles, that would have been the end of him. So he used to go up on the terrace - every house had a terrace up there - and from one terrace to another to escape being caught. And eventually through all the anxiety and the weather - he used to come back drenched from rain and all that - and I think in just over a year he was gone. We were left ... my mother's father Alphonse Haricot Poulot - he was a wonderful man.

SM: A Greek?

EC: Yes, but he used to say 'I'm not a Greek, I'm Hellenic'. Because he wasn't an Orthodox Greek, he was a Catholic.

SM: Oh really?

EC: Yes. That's why he didn't consider himself as a Greek. However, he was wonderful. They were all on the railways. My father was an engineer.

SM: I think what we'll do is just stop there.

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EC: ... and the first thing he said to me was, "You should have twelve babies!"

SM: Am I right in thinking you stopped at two?

EC: It was so easy! From beginning to end it lasted just three hours.

SM: My wife was in labour with our eldest son for nearly twenty four hours.

EC: They took the baby away and I was on my own in my room and suddenly I started panicking. I thought, "What if they bring the wrong baby, a Turkish baby? I was the only British in the hospital." So I kept ringing my bell and eventually a nurse came in and said, "What's the matter, Mrs Cox?" I said I wanted to see the doctor. She asked if there was anything wrong. The doctor came and said "What's wrong, Mrs Cox?" I said, "What if they bring the wrong baby, a Turkish baby?" He said, "There's no fear of that. She's the only blonde in the hospital!"

SM: Presumably they'd given you some sort of anaesthetic?

EC: Yes, yes.

SM: Let's go back. So you grew up in Smyrna and you then somehow ended up working for the Embassy in Ankara. How did that happen?

EC: Well, in 1922, there was the fire in Smyrna. To this day, nobody knows who set the fire going. Mother had bought a house parallel to the seafront and furnished it from top to bottom. We were going to move in in a week's time. When the fire broke out, the house was burnt. So we never saw that house. However a guard from the British Consulate came round to the house and told Mother to dress us up and not to take anything at all with us. He took us to

the Consulate and eventually we landed at the Customs office, where all the boats were. We were taken to the main hospital ship, a big ship. The sailors there made so much of all the children, the youngsters. They spoil us, buying us chocolates and taking us all over the place. The next thing ... we landed in Malta. Some people landed in Gibraltar, but our ship landed in Malta and we were there for four years. I went to the French school at the age of seven until the fire broke out so I had nearly three years. And that's where my French came in very nicely even though I was that young. I was very good at school actually and then there was Lord Moncrieff - he was the Governor in Malta. And he came to visit all the British families. We had a lovely big bedroom and we used to go upstairs to have our lunch. When Moncrieff came, he asked me if I would like to go to school in Malta. I said I thought I knew enough of the Maltese schools. He laughed and said he didn't know enough himself. How can you know enough at ten or eleven years old? Anyway, I never went to school in Malta. But we had an English teacher and she opened a little school quite near our hospital and I had about a year and a half there with her. Then we were evacuated to Ricaseri which is a fort by the harbour.

SM: This is still in Malta?

EC: Still in Malta. It was near Valletta. They used to take us in a rowing boat from there to Valletta for shopping or whatever.

EC's daughter: Mum, can I just interrupt? Were you speaking English then? When you were four and your father died, because your Mother didn't speak any English ...

EC: No, broken English at the end of her life ...

EC's daughter: So you were speaking English from four years old? You went to a French school, didn't you?

EC: No, Father died when I was that age.

EC's daughter: That's what I'm saying. He must have spoken to you in English.

EC: He used to speak to us in English.

EC's daughter: But when he died, you were only four, so how did you speak so well in English?

EC: Because when Father was still alive, there was a Mrs Newton next door, living on her own, an elderly English woman. She used to give private lessons. Father sent ...

EC's daughter: What were these English people doing in Turkey at that time? I don't understand.

EC: Turkey at that time was in name only. It belonged mostly to the British. Then the French, Italians, Swedes ... This was before the Turks took over, after the First World War. I'm talking of 1918. Turkey was in name only. Everything else was under foreign element. Everything, from business to schools.

EC's daughter: I just wondered, because I knew you'd gone to a French school so I thought you'd be speaking French with Granny.

EC: Yes, yes.

EC's daughter: You couldn't have spoken much English?

EC: Well I didn't until we went to Malta. They wanted to teach us Maltese - what a horrible language it sounded!

SM: At home with your mother, what language did you speak there?

EC: Well, we spoke a lot of French because, funnily enough, although my grandfather was Hellenic as he used to put it, he had four daughters. He spoke to them in French, the language in the home. Don't ask me why - I don't know. There must be a reason.

EC's daughter: But Granny's mother was French, wasn't she?

EC: Yes, yes. That's why my grandfather kept French. And I speak Greek of a kind. Not very elegant.

EC's daughter: And Italian.

EC: Yes, Italian.

EC's daughter: A bit of Spanish.

EC: Olé!

SM: So you did some schooling in Malta in this little private school. How did you get from there back to working for the Foreign Office in Ankara?

EC: Now I was working when we said we'd eventually go back to Turkey. At the age of 17 I had finished my schooling. We didn't have a lot of money and my brother was lucky to find a good job because he was very clever with figures. Maths was his strongest subject. It was my weakest. However, when we got back from Malta, the Consulate was starting to ask all the British families one by one. We had a claim from London - that was in 1926 - £1,500 for all we lost. It was a little fortune. English pounds. Then of course schooling went on, mine for about two years, but my brother who was 17, nearly 18, went to the French school - they were Jesuits. Wonderful teachers. He finished there and then, with the money Mother had - unfortunately, I don't know why - my father's eldest brother left London and emigrated to Australia with his young family. I don't know how he heard where we were because the next thing was we had a letter saying 'Just say when you're coming and I'll have the ticket ready for you to come to Australia'. And of course we were too young to decide about that. Mother wanted to come back to stupid Turkey.

EC's daughter: Oh, Mum. You wouldn't have met Dad if you had gone to Australia! So how did you end up in the Embassy? How did you get that job?

EC: Alfred Bartolo who was a British subject lived next door to us. He was assistant to Sherif Rimzi, a very wealthy man. He asked Mother if I would like to have a job. I went for an interview, I was 17 and I worked nine years for him.

SM: Tell me, Ethel. This job was working in Smyrna?

EC: It was in Smyrna. He was a wealthy Turk and a real gentleman. He was so good to me.

SM: What was his name?

EC: Sherif Rimzi. In the late 50s he added a surname, Rayent, because most of them just had a Christian name. When the British Consul came around to their house, he asked if I minded going for a drive with him. We went for a drive by the seafront and he said to me, "How would you like to work for the British Embassy in Ankara?" I was always a bit adventurous around something new. I said, "Yes, I would love it!" Anyway, that was it and on 2 February 1940 I was in Ankara.

SM: So what was your job?

EC: I was a shorthand typist. At first I worked for the Commercial Attaché, Jones his name was, an Australian. I wasn't very happy. It wasn't very exciting, to do with commerce and all that. I was only there for a couple of months and suddenly the Embassy wanted me to go and work at the Embassy, so I landed at the Embassy, in the Chancery, the heart of the Embassy really. It was a beautiful dream for me. Vincent was the Head of Chancery. He was the nicest person I have ever met in my life! Vincent was his family name. I never knew his Christian name. He was a wonderful chap. There was also someone called Frobelius. He was next to Vincent. And of course, all the time there was a German spy in the Chancery! Sheringham. His mother was Hungarian and his father was British.

SM: What was it like working in the Embassy in Ankara? You got to work in Chancery.

EC: I used to take down shorthand from the Secretaries ... Geoffrey MacDermott, Tony Lambert, and Charles ... what's his other name?

SM: Did you ever come across a chap called Edward Peck? He was a Third Secretary at some point.

EC: He was the Consul. He married us before we got married in a Turkish registry office. We had to get married there.

SM: So you got married in the Embassy?

EC: There was only one Catholic church in the whole of Ankara. There was no Church of England or any other kind of church. It was in old Ankara, a bit tumbledown. We lived in new Ankara which was only 15 years old. All the Embassies used to be in Istanbul. Until the Italians started talking about invading Istanbul. Kemal Ataturk was a great man. He did wonders for Turkey. He transferred the capital to Ankara. It was a desert. They were planting and watering trees for 24 hours a day for a whole year!

SM: Tell me, you were mentioning this espionage business. So there was a German spy in the Embassy?

EC: In the Chancery, where I was working. Dora Russell, another girl who was working with me. We both had different offices but next door to each other. She used to do shorthand typing as well. We used to put all our books, reports, letters, anything left over for the next day in a tray into iron cupboards and lock them up. We gave the keys to Mr Vincent. The next morning when we opened up, my tray was empty. And so was Dora's. Anything we had

taken down in shorthand, the shorthand books, the letters, whatever there was in the tray went missing. Because before all that happened there were little circulars going round to the staff of the Embassy, time and time again, from the Ambassador: who is talking outside working hours? A lot of information was getting out to the German Embassy. And of course we were only too glad to forget about our work and enjoy our evening once we were finished with the Embassy. We had a wonderful time there.

SM: So who was this person doing the espionage, do you think?

EC: And apart from that, in the hall at the entrance of the Embassy, there was a big table indoors and we used to have these Army chaps every now and then from the desert - they'd come for a break to Ankara - and they were the guards. One morning - they had photographs of everyone working at the Embassy - and when they opened the top drawer for their photo book, it had disappeared. Gone again to the Germans. About a week later they were all back. And it was Sheringham who was doing all that.

SM: Was he ever prosecuted or dealt with? Did they catch him doing it?

EC: Yes. One morning Sir John Dashwood - you've heard of him? - he came over. He was the Head of Scotland Yard. He came over to see what was happening at the Embassy with everything disappearing. He came down to my office and called Joan Wingate who was from the Foreign Office and Dora Russell. He kept asking us ... his pockets were full of toffees which he handed out ... all sorts of easy questions, but at the same time to the point, to see if we knew anything or if we said the wrong things outside. After he had finished with us, he went back to see Vincent and he said "I want the wall where all the telephones are brought down" - there was a big wall full of telephones. They did that, because he was so insistent about it, and they found that the Embassy telephone lines were linked with the German Embassy! And that's how they were getting all the conversations between the Ambassador, the political Secretaries. Eventually it stopped, but before all that, Dora and I every other week we used to work until about 10 o'clock at night with one of the Secretaries taking down codes and sending them to London. Whatever was going on was always in code, not in ordinary letters. And one night, as Geoffrey was dictating these codes, and I was taking them down, there was a bell, right under the ground where I was sitting. I said to Geoffrey, "There's a telephone going on" and of course he heard it. So I picked up the telephone to see who it was. The most stupid thing. "Iz zat ze Breeteesh Embassy?" The first thing I thought of saying was, "No, ziz ees not ze Breeteesh Embassy. It eez a private number." And I put

the phone down. And Geoffrey couldn't help himself from laughing. He said, "What's this all about?"

SM: Tell me. There's another leakage of information.

EC: The Ambassador's valet. I'm afraid I can't remember his name.

SM: I can tell you his name was Ilyas Bazna. He was the valet to Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen.

EC: The Ambassador was related to the Queen Mother. He was a lovely man. His wife was very snooty. She used to ask us girls either to tea or lunch. Dora was the first one to go and she was terrified. As they were eating, suddenly Lady Hugessen put her knife and fork down and Dora went on eating. Lady Hugessen was most upset. She said, "Stop now!" Isn't that odd? So Dora warned me to put everything down the moment she finished. And I did. She asked me to tea one afternoon with all sorts of little cakes and things. She was nice to talk to but suddenly she'd get all snooty. But he was a poppet. Everybody liked him. He would talk to you. Tall man with a lovely smile. And we had Anthony Eden there for two weeks nearly. I used to love him. He was such a handsome looking man. Beautiful eyes. I knew he had a conference with all the diplomats and I was waiting out in the hall to see him for the last time. Dora and I did quite a lot of work for him. He had his own secretary, Anne, but a lot of reports came to me and Dora. So when eventually he was going back to Istanbul I was waiting to see him off. Before he left, he asked the Ambassador to bring Dora and me to the station to see him off and for him to thank us for all the work we did for him. Which was lovely. And of course the Ambassador took us in his car to the railway station. And there he was with a great big box of chocolates for me and Dora and we were eating those chocolates for evermore! He shook our hands and thanked us. I thought it was absolutely wonderful.

SM: When they were investigating the leaks, did you get asked lots of questions? Was it just John Dashwood who asked you the questions?

EC: He asked lots of innocent questions to catch us out. We were quite honest and open with our answers. He was quite happy with that. That's when he decided to have the wall down. Do you know why, Syd? When there was the eagle's nest, as they used to call it, in the old Embassy, right up at the top, when they were building the new Embassy, they didn't trust the Turks as good builders, they asked builders from Hungary. Well there was nothing much known about Hungary in Germany, well nothing at all, and of course they were the ones who

linked ... when they were building the wall ... the telephones to Germany. The next thing was that Sheringham was taken away.

SM: What happened to him?

EC: To this day, I don't know.

SM: What was his job at the Embassy?

EC: He was in the Chancery. That's why he knew a lot of things that he shouldn't have known. And he passed everything to the Germans.

SM: Some of the things that were leaked - it's apparent from investigations that they carried on - they know they didn't actually leak through the Chancery, and they know it was the valet to the Ambassador that did it because there was a document that was copied four times. The lady that produced it was the wife of the Minister in Ankara. She made a correction on three of the documents but the uncorrected document was in the Ambassador's ...

EC: I never heard of a lady.

SM: She was the Minister's wife. She must have worked as a secretary. I will find her name in a minute.

How long were you actually working in the Embassy? You were there during the war. You started in 1940, I think you said, and this espionage business ... the leaks were in late '43.

EC: The leak was in '43?

SM: You think it was earlier?

EC: Not in '43. I left in '43.

SM: Did you?

EC: Because I got married there and my husband was transferred back to Egypt. And I had to go with him. Carol was a year old.

SM: So you left the Embassy when?

EC: In June 1943.

SM: Do you remember a Mrs Sterndale-Bennett? She was the wife of the Minister in Ankara. He may have arrived after you left.

EC: Perhaps. I would have remembered the name. The Head of Chancery was Morgan and his wife was Swiss. I can't remember her name but they were Catholic. They pestered and pestered me not to marry a Protestant and that if I had a child it would be made a Catholic. And of course I started crying because he was talking so harshly. I got up to go and he said to me, "You know where you're going when you die, Ethel? You'll be going to Hell!" Before I closed the door, I turned round and said, "We'll all be there some day!"

SM: Life in Ankara. When you and your friend left work at the Embassy, it sounds as though you had a good social life.

EC: Yes indeed.

SM: So you weren't working there for very long. About three years?

EC: Yes, three years and two months, I think.

SM: Then you went to Egypt.

EC: Yes, I didn't like it. Well it was absolutely packed with all the allies. Australians, British, French.

SM: Were you in Cairo or in Alexandria?

EC: In Cairo. We stayed in a hotel at first. We had three very good friends from the American Embassy in Ankara. For our last Christmas there, they gave us a beautiful spaniel, black, a puppy and we called him Kismet. We managed to take him from Ankara to Egypt without anybody knowing. He never left our cabin! We got to this hotel and about three or four days later I looked for Kismet and couldn't find him anywhere. I went downstairs and saw the manager and asked if he had seen a little black spaniel. He said he had seen some Army boys holding one. They took him to the desert with them! Oh, I was heartbroken. He was a lovely dog.

SM: Tell me, at some point you must have come back to England, presumably at the end of the war?

EC: In 1945 I came to England. My husband took me to his mother's in Finchley. She was a wonderful mother in law. She was as good as a mother to me. She was wonderful to the children and had them to stay with her. I stayed three years because there were no married quarters at that time. Oxford Street was still in ruins. We went to Germany on posting in 1951. That was a very bitter pill to swallow. We wanted to go to Hanover, which had apparently been flattened by the RA. But when we arrived there was not one bit of ruin but a beautiful city. We were so angry!

SM: Because they'd rebuilt it?

EC: Absolutely, and then you come back to England in '45 and Oxford Street is still in ruins!

SM: Tell me, when you were growing up in Smyrna, what did you think of yourself in terms of nationality?

EC: Always British. But we always went to a lovely bridge and tennis club owned by the French Consulate. And the French Consul was a wonderful chap. Whatever was going on in the French Consulate, he always used to ask my brother and I. We were the only non-French.

SM: Ethel, thank you very much for your reminiscences.