

HUTSON, JOHN WHITEFORD OBE (1966)

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

JOHN HUTSON OBE

RB: An interview on 1 March 1996 with Mr. John Hutson, a retired member of Her Majesty's Diplomatic Service. I shall begin by asking Mr. Hutson if he could very briefly give the dates of his service, the honours which he achieved during his career and then ask him to explain briefly why he chose to join the Diplomatic Service and what his impressions were in his early years as a member of the Service.

JH: Well, the dates of my service were from 1951 to 1987. It was slightly delayed by two years' National Service at the beginning and I left six months early, because I had been in what they called at one time 'hardship posts' which entitled one to slightly earlier retirement. I didn't use the maximum of that. My career was a mixture of work in the Office, of course, but more in embassies and consular posts abroad and a regular period as an inspector (as the Diplomatic Service is self-administering and runs its own inspection service as well); so there are three legs to this, you might say. As regards Honours I was made OBE in 1967 and the reason was never explicit, because it is not made explicit in these cases but it was in fact, I think, because, as I subsequently heard, I had 'held the fort' at a difficult time; it was a matter which could have gone wrong, but as it went right it did not, of course, make the same headlines. This all took place in my first consular post, which was San Francisco, on the occasion of the first visit to the United States of Her Royal Highness Princess Margaret and her husband Lord Snowdon; they were arriving in San Francisco and going on to other places including Washington in the States, but it was thought very important that they should get a good reception and a good Press - good publicity - on their first stop in the States and as I was in charge of the Consulate at the time, because we were between two Consuls-General, this fell on me a good deal; though I have to admit that the Embassy in Washington sent the Minister, Mr. Michael Stewart, from Washington to hold my hand and he was very helpful, because he stayed in the background and relied on ourselves in the post - who knew everybody and had arranged everything - to do our jobs and allowed himself to be 'bear led' on the occasions when he had to meet people and so on; he gave advice but, as I said, he did not try to hog the limelight and it was

in fact helpful to have him there; and it was shortly after this that I was made OBE and that, apart from anecdotes about the visit itself, is really all there is to say about it.

RB: John, could you perhaps say a few words about why you decided to make a career in the Diplomatic Service; and, having done so, your impressions of your first postings which were, I think, Prague, Berlin and Saigon.

JH: Yes, with pleasure. I took a degree in modern languages at Glasgow - in French and German - and I had the good luck to spend a year in France and six months in Vienna as a language student, before I got my degree; I enjoyed that very much and I decided that I liked other countries and other nationalities, certainly when one was able to speak the language and get inside the skin of the place a bit, and so I thought that I would like to work in the Diplomatic Service. However, it was not very easy to get in and perhaps for reasons of native caution I did the obvious thing and sat a conventional written examination for the Home Civil Service before going to do my two years' National Service in the Royal Air Force. I was accepted for the Home Civil, but the respite of these two years in the RAF gave me the chance to sit the new style so-called Method 2 examination, largely interviews and tests of various kinds, for the Diplomatic Service and luckily for me they were taking in a fairly large number in these postwar years and I was among the number; so I said 'good-bye' to the Home Civil before ever actually joining it. I was quite quickly posted abroad but not immediately, of course; in fact I spent a year as a Russian language student doing the Foreign Office's first Russian course run by a single emigré gentleman at that time Mr. Ostrikov, a never to be forgotten character, and as a result I was posted to Eastern Europe, though not to Moscow: my two colleagues went to Moscow; and I landed in Prague. The overwhelming impression of Czechoslovakia was of a population with its head well down; they had just the year before had the Slansky trial which was their brand of Soviet-style terror trial and the populace was pretty thoroughly cowed; we only met one unofficial Czech family in all our time there. (Incidentally, that was one more than a good many diplomatic families knew as far as we could find out). They were courageous enough to invite us to their home, but we had to park three streets away and so on. I met one or two other unofficial Czechs and they were also very

careful about being seen with us or anything like that; it was rather heart-breaking. Incidentally we only met two official Czechs all the time we were there and they were the two desk officers who were supposed to deal with us; they had the British desk in the Czech Foreign Office. We didn't meet anyone more senior or anyone different; even the Ambassador, I think, dealt mainly with these two and the sole achievement of my time there was that we obtained the release of an elderly Czech who had been a local employee of the Embassy and had been arrested on some trumped up charge by the Czech authorities and put in jail; but he also had British nationality, if I remember correctly, and so we had a status as regards making claims for his release and eventually by sheer persistence we obtained his release and he was able to live out his retirement years in Britain: but otherwise it was a case of trying to learn about the place in spite of the local authorities and keeping up the morale of people in the Post.

My own morale was suffering by the end of the first year as I was still living in a hotel; all housing was State-controlled and the so-called Office for Services to the Diplomatic Corps had still not found me a flat to live in. I was going home on leave to get married and had to have a flat on return with my bride! However, when I did return a flat was produced. One exciting little episode was the visit of a technical "de-bugging" team from London. In the early 1950s microphones were quite large, and when they traced one they were able to dig it out of the wall with cold chisels - provided the opposition did not hear them and pull it out first. They had got one such trophy from the only party wall which our offices had; and quite a few from the Canadian Legation which was in a flat with party walls all round. In those early days it was quite a shock for the Canadians to think that their confidential discussions had been conducted in the hearing of their Czech communist hosts.

Then after a short spell at home I was sent to Berlin. Our first child was born in Berlin not long after we arrived. I was sent to Berlin really as a budding East European specialist, because my job there was to study the East German regime and the GDR generally and the closest we could get to it in those days of non-recognition and the Hallstein doctrine (which as you know meant that no State that wanted relations with West Germany could recognise the East German regime) and those things meant that Berlin was the nearest thing to an observation post

in the GDR that we could have; so I read Neues Deutschland and the other papers run by the puppet secondary political parties. I swanned around East Berlin on the overhead and underground railways a good deal and drove in sometimes and looked at the place and studied it as much as possible and tried to work out what the developments were and report them to London. I went to the Leipzig Fair a couple of times and I had one other trip around East Germany; I think my wife and I were the last people to have a tour in East Germany on a Soviet visa and not an East German visa; the East Germans, by this time, disliked people travelling on Soviet visas very much but the Russians still occasionally, as occupying power, produced one. The uprising in East Germany, of course, had already happened, but there was great excitement at the time of the Hungarian uprising in case it was successful and the East Germans again rose and might shake the regime as they had done three years earlier on the famous 17 June 1953 but they did not actually do so; the tide turned in Hungary a little too quickly, probably, for that to happen. Another thing which occurred during my time, although I cannot give a precise date out of my head, was a currency reform in East Germany and East Berlin which gave rise to considerable excitement in the population but did not lead to anything like a revolt; as soon as we heard about it on the radio I went over to East Berlin that morning and observed people walking up and down in the streets looking considerably more excited than they did on a normal Sunday, but heading for the place where they could exchange their old Marks at a very poor rate, still the only value they now had under the reform, but apart from gesticulations and conversation there was no more radical reaction to be observed. Berlin was still a very curious place, of course; we had the privilege of living in very comfortable West European circumstances - the circumstances really of an occupying power, very good living conditions, living in a Western country and observing an Eastern one which was run in the Soviet style and which was much less well off and not having to suffer the living conditions which to a large extent one did in Prague or other places in Eastern Europe. It was a unique case because at that time two or three thousand refugees a month, I think it is right to say, were leaving East Germany via Berlin for the West and that was a very interesting phenomenon. We had our own small team of interrogators who simply tried to obtain information about conditions in East Germany from these people as they passed through and we learned a lot in that way, of course, which we could not otherwise have learned; the story of what happened to them in West Germany

and how many of them eventually went back is a very interesting one which I am sure has been studied subsequently although I am not aware of the detail. Quite a sizeable minority did go back and they were among the very many who had left simply because the open door of Berlin doubled their chances in life. If they didn't like where they were they could try West Germany; they were given help, they were given finance for a time in West Germany and I am sure that many of them made the grade, but quite a few didn't. Some of those who were just economic refugees went back again eventually although the East Germans never managed to publicise that very effectively. That was one peculiar phenomenon arising from the open nature of the two halves of Berlin and the fact that East Berlin was open to the GDR; but that was also exemplified by the fact that the first two housemaids we hired in succession in West Berlin lived in East Berlin and commuted from there every day; they were occasionally searched at the first station in the Eastern Sector and they were probably interrogated by the police every now and then to learn what they could say about us; but if they were wide-awake then they survived quite well under these peculiar circumstances; it was not something that could really happen anywhere else.

RB: Interestingly enough, John, your next posting was to Saigon - in those days a complete contrast, one would think, to Berlin.

JH: Well, it was a contrast to Berlin in every possible way; I think it exemplifies the general policy of allowing specialists to come up for air by getting a completely different job from time to time or a job in a completely different area. We had three years in Saigon which we enjoyed very much; it was rather between, roughly speaking, between the French wars and the American war one might say, although in fact the guerrilla fighting never completely stopped and from 1960 onwards it was stoked up by North Vietnamese forces coming down unofficially, so to speak - not in uniform - from the North and supporting the guerrillas in the South; the security situation got much worse during the three years that I was there. We had in fact a small British Mission; it was called, in fact, the British Advisory Mission and BRIAM under the leadership of a Colonel Thomson who had been - who had played a leading part in the successful elimination of the terrorist threat in Malaya some years earlier and this mission was offering some support by way of advice to the South Vietnamese government, which had to deal with a much worse

guerrilla threat, and supporting and working very well with a much larger American mission which was doing the same thing and which was, unlike ours, a military mission, of course. By the time we left in September, I think, '62 there were about 15,000 members of the American forces in South Vietnam and we thought that was a lot although, of course, that was nothing to what came subsequently when what I call for short the American war, really developed; it was an interim period but it was long enough to develop a great sympathy for the Vietnamese people and to hope that things are gradually becoming better for them - as one gathers from news reports that they perhaps are.

I had two Ambassadors during my three years in Saigon, both very competent men, both representing in a way the British Empire attitude, but without in the least detracting from their competence as diplomats accredited to a completely foreign power. They were up-to-date in what they did, but their basic attitudes were very interesting to someone who was just a small boy before the Second World War. Sir Roderick Parkes had been an Administrator and Judge in the Sub-continent and, I think, previously in the Sudan Civil Service and Mr. Hohler belonged, I think, to a very well-to-do family and was certainly personally well off and was in the diplomatic career because he liked it. He was a hard worker; they were both very quick at dispatching work - you have to be if you are going to become an ambassador - and very competent intellectually. Mr. Hohler thought things ought to be run rather in the pre-war style; for him his Residence was the place to be called the Embassy, the other building, the office where we all worked and which most people even at that time called the Embassy was for him the Chancery. If you said the Embassy you had to mean his house and indeed frequently he did not come to the Embassy but stayed at home and you went to see him. This, as I say, did not detract from his efficiency which was considerable. So these two gave me an idea of what things might have been like in an earlier period. The two most exciting events of my time there were, in fact, the two attempts to remove the then President Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam by force - I mention this because he was finally removed by force and killed some years after I left the country and it is of interest that there had been two previous attempts, although there was no suggestion that either of these two previous attempts was with American connivance. The first was an attempt by the chiefs of the elite paratroop regiment to

get the President to abdicate by shelling his Palace, which they could conveniently do as their barracks was at the other end of the main avenue leading to the front of the Palace. This lasted about three days and as my house was close to the said avenue I and my family were boxed in. Other more senior staff got to the office and in fact, thanks to their good contacts, were able to follow the negotiations between the parties (the President only kept these going long enough for loyal reinforcements to reach Saigon) and so kept HMG very well informed.

The second occasion, two years later, was an attempt by two pilots of the South Vietnamese air force to assassinate the President by firing rockets at the Palace, hoping to hit his bedroom; they hit the Palace, but they hit the wrong quarter; one of them was captured and I hate to think what happened to him; the second one got away, I think, to Cambodia; but as I say the main interest is that the final removal was - to speak cynically - third time lucky.

These two episodes were the first times - the only times - I heard shots fired in anger during my service; although I have also heard the roar of a mob out for one's blood which is equally frightening.

One other feature of our Saigon posting; my wife tended to make higher level contacts there than the middle ranking officials I dealt with myself, working mainly on British aid to Vietnam under the Colombo Plan. She got to know a number of emancipated and influential women and she taught English to prominent people including the South Vietnamese minister of Defence - not to mention that her gynaecologist for our third child was the Minister of Health! It is worth pointing out that if you are married the job is very much a team effort and the more it is so the better the results.

RB: So after Saigon your next posting was very different yet again, to San Francisco as Consul Commercial.

JH: That's right. I began as Consul but I soon succeeded to the Commercial post which was really more important and more interesting and I had four very happy years there and my wife would say the same, but she had to work very hard because a peculiarity of going to, I suppose, the most advanced

Western country is that you do your own housework. We certainly could not afford resident staff such as we had in Saigon and in fact we hired people 'ad hoc' for our entertaining with the curious result that the dates of our dinner parties were fixed by the availability of our favourite Austrian cook. We used to ring her up in September and obtain roughly a date each month or so when she was available, book those dates throughout the winter months for the season before she went back to Austria for her summer holidays again, and those were the days on which we did that kind of entertaining and it was quite difficult unless you just hired a caterer to do anything large that was impromptu; but that peculiarity aside of course, the place was very agreeable - California was beautiful and offered unlimited possibilities which I regret I didn't take more advantage of, but our children were very young at the time, for recreation. And also California had just recently, I think, become the largest State in the Union and was feeling on top of the world so it was a pleasant place to be. Consular work was not especially demanding - Commercial work was demanding and required both luck and perseverance because California is the kind of place that exports more than it imports so to speak; the typical firm in California is Hewlett Packard, a name very well known as they advertise in all the computer and office equipment magazines; they already had their own subsidiary in Britain and you couldn't sell them anything that they didn't know about; so it tended to be a bit uphill in some ways although there were things that sold well. If the Jaguar car company could have geared itself to produce twice the number of cars and especially if they could have made them more reliable than they were in those days, but even if they could not, they could have sold more; they had frequent break-downs; but they still had waiting lists of purchasers, it was such an attractive car. Indeed many other makes of cars sold at the time; that was before the British car industry was as concentrated as it is now. It is difficult to do justice to California in a few words, indeed I won't try, but I will recap our advice to people who thought of retiring to California which was that they had better have a very good pension because it would not be easy to find a retirement job unless they were quite exceptional and their pounds would not go as far as they thought in that beautiful place. On the Commercial work we had high hopes, at one point, of selling a lot of equipment to the San Francisco area because they were planning the Bay Area rapid transit system - their own underground for the whole region around San Francisco - at the time and they were very interested in the experience of London Underground; in fact, the Minister of Transport,

himself a former engineering businessman, Mr. Marples, came to San Francisco at the time. We did sell them an excellent film which, I remember, lasted about twenty minutes showing the building of tunnels for the London Underground - the Victoria line in fact - showing the nightly maintenance of the whole London Underground network which they saw; this they loved and they bought a copy of it in order to show all their politicians how much work had to go into maintaining such a thing; it is a very impressive film and delightfully humorous, but it doesn't detract from the serious message. However, our endeavours to sell them more solid hardware like signal and braking systems and steel rails or anything of that sort were stymied by the Californian Buy American Act. The United States Buy American Act, the Federal Act, at that time prevented Government agencies, central government agencies buying things from abroad. The Californian Buy American Act prevented anyone in California, even the local government agency, buying things from outside the United States; it was much more far-reaching in its effects than the Federal Act and that was a great pity from our point of view and the rapid transit system (which is very good I believe) might have been even better; certainly our exports would have benefited.

An event which happened pretty early in our time there was the assassination of John F. Kennedy. About that I need only say that we did come across one or two Republicans who in the immediate aftermath, just in some hours or days, were quite prepared to show that they were glad that this had happened; this was a rude awakening to our perhaps rather naive selves.

RB: You returned to London and were soon promoted to Counsellor.

JH: Not quite. First I spent two years in Sofia as head of Chancery in our modest Embassy there. It was reminiscent of Prague, though better in some ways. As the number two I learned a lot about running and administering an embassy. The main East European event of the time was the Prague Spring and the consequent Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968; we were on the sidelines. I sometimes think the Commercial Attaché had a better job. While learning Bulgarian I made a lot of use of my main languages there, French and German, as many high-ranking Bulgarians spoke one or the other, while my Ambassador - a very astute man - came from the Commonwealth relations side and was not a linguist. Then I did return to London, where, at first, I was one of the two Assistants in EESD

- East European and Soviet Department - then the Assistants' posts were abolished when EESD became one of the guinea pigs in an experiment to do without Assistant Heads of Department - to have only the Head of each Department and Desk Officers working to him or her; I believe that this was never generally adopted but EESD was one of the experimental departments where it actually happened. I moved to IRD on promotion to Counsellor where however again I did not spend very long; my main memory of IRD were that its size and effectiveness were being questioned at the time and I spent most of my time in helping to draft defensive papers pointing out that it was valuable and suggesting that it was still needed to combat Communist propaganda by presenting the other side of matters, in fact the true side; I still feel quite strongly that there is such a thing as good propaganda, i.e. that which is worthy to be propagated i.e. the truth and it was certainly very necessary in the days of the British Soviet Friendship Society and other such bodies and the World Youth Forum etc., etc. and it is very necessary that we do have something more than just our perhaps rather naive free Press - naive at least in that respect.

However, that episode was quite short. I found myself being asked to go to Baghdad on the basis that I was urgently needed there to support the Ambassador, Mr. Glen Balfour Paul. I went reluctantly pointing out that I was no Arabist; they said it did not matter, everybody important speaks English; this was virtually true and in the event that was my shortest posting of all as eight months after I arrived there the Iraqis broke off relations and we all had to leave at short notice. I should say that this was the third time that they had broken off relations; the first one, of course, being in 1958 when Colonel Kassem perpetrated his coup d'etat and when Nuri Said and the King were assassinated but it's perhaps worth saying that ours was the first breach which was carried out in a civilised manner - that is to say we had fourteen days notice; we called the packers; we left on a civil aeroplane scheduled flight twelve days after the notice being given. On the first occasion the Embassy staff were besieged and held under guns in the Compound under the sun for a whole day. On the second occasion the staff had to leave by car to Iran, so I was told, and were harassed right up to the Iranian border; that is hearsay - my point is that we were not so treated on the occasion that affected us.

The cause for the breach in relations was that Great Britain had just withdrawn from

the Gulf. The Shah of Iran had indicated that he would take over the security of the Gulf if we left and in particular he would take over the Islands - the Tumbs Islands and Abu Musa - we left and he duly did what he said that he would do and the Iraqis, who had been making all sort of ferocious threats about what they would do both to Iran and ourselves if this all happened, contented themselves in the event with breaking off relations, Diplomatic relations, and I am pretty sure that they did not do anything else.

I was sorry about this premature departure. I had not been able to do much commercial promotion because we were being progressively frozen out by the regime owing to the situation that we were about to leave the Gulf and I was not able either to see half the fascinating archaeological remains which are to be found in present day Iraq; there are at least two amazing monuments in the immediate neighbourhood of Baghdad which we did see. We saw briefly the half excavated city of Nimrud and we also saw a less known but more excavated one called Hatra the only Parthian city or remains which I have ever seen and which was also fascinating for its similarities to but differences from Roman remains. The only other striking memory I have, I think, is that of a brief visit, on a weekend holiday, to Kurdish territory around the hills above Mosul. I liked the look of the Kurds; they seemed rather jolly - they liked firing in the air to celebrate weddings and they seemed to me to have a much more likeable and devil may care attitude in their general posture and behaviour than the Arabs of the plains, although this is a very superficial judgement. At any rate, ever since, I have felt great sympathy for them and the way they have been ill treated especially by the Iraqis, but also by the other nations among whom they are spread and I think it was a grave injustice, not having the same pull as some other people, they were not given their own nation as had been promised, I believe, during the First World War; this might have avoided a great deal of bloodshed and oppression since and as a consequence the present treatment by Saddam Hussein at the other end of Iraq of the Marsh Arabs - who knows? - might also have been avoided. Thus we came home from Baghdad, just before Christmas, with no roof under which to put our children as they emerged from boarding school; these problems were all solved quite easily, of course, in a country like Britain and our relatives would not have left us in the lurch anyway; however I was on indefinite leave since obviously I had not been due for another job for

two or three years more. After some weeks in Scotland waiting for news, however, I was asked to join the Inspectorate and in order to have a job I willingly did so. The Inspectorate, in fact, formed a very interesting part of my career and, unlike most Inspectors, I had a second crack at it near the end when I left Frankfurt subsequently and was asked to replace an Inspector - who had been lost over board was the term I used at the time - but, in fact, he had been urgently promoted to fill a very senior post - at any rate I had a second crack and I inspected my old stamping ground of Germany in that later period. The largest post of all I did - or rather the largest post I inspected - was Paris, which was towards the end of my first and major time as an Inspector; it gives one quite a different view of the Service. The FCO being self-administering, one has to look at a post abroad or a department at home within the Foreign Office and ask oneself is it really necessary, is what it is doing still relevant, is it properly equipped to do what it properly should be doing and so on; of course, one tends when one is in a job, to assume that it is necessary and that it is properly staffed or frequently that it does not have enough staff - the Inspector is the counterbalance to that natural tendency and it is just as well that the work is done by people who have previously been working as officers in post in the Service and who know that, all being well, they will be so again. This may be thought to encourage acceptance of the status quo, but I do not think that was true of our time; the Civil Service was under pressure always, I think, perhaps since the late '60's to economise - quite frequently this was done by a Government edict to the effect that five or ten per cent of expenses had to be cut and this led to very serious attempts to reduce any superfluties; but one had to begin from the need for the job; this is something that needs a book to itself.

There are people now who question the need for resident Ambassadors; on that I would like only to say that in the short term the existence of the EU has led to more work for Diplomats and not less; this is because the EU is in a state of perpetual negotiation. Not only do we have an extra post in Brussels - a very large one - to deal with this; we have probably more staff in the other Union capitals who have to sound out their host governments about EU matters so that we can more effectively develop the Union and safeguard our own interests in it as a result of their information; that was certainly the impression I had when inspecting Paris and subsequently the impression I had when inspecting Bonn in the 1980's. In the longer term we may well be able to achieve economies thanks to the EU.

RB: So after the Inspectorate you went to Moscow as Counsellor Commercial.

JH: Yes, that's right. That was an interesting period for me. It was not very enjoyable for my wife although she gallantly learned Russian, starting from scratch, and was able to enjoy TV and some of the other attractions but she was not, of course, able to enjoy any natural contact with ordinary Russians and that was not really possible. I had a lot of contact in my job with official Russians and we had an interesting job - a job which was very plainly marked out - Soviet trade was dealt with by monopoly organisations - there was only one organisation which had the right to use foreign exchange to buy foreign goods for the Soviet Union or goods of a particular type - one organisation for machine tools, one for light industry equipment, one for textiles, one for chemicals and so on - so there was your monopoly customer. You and other suppliers were competing for their favours so they drove a very hard bargain, all the harder because, strangely enough, their aim was not to fulfil their plan on time; their aim was to make sure that when they eventually fulfilled the plan probably years late they had so tied up everything that none of the Soviet officials concerned in the buying organisation or the Ministry of Foreign Trade could possibly be blamed for having allowed the foreigners to have put one across them - this excessive care to clear things with everybody and make sure that many other people were sharing the responsibility was probably the main reason for the chronic delays which occurred. British firms which managed to obtain a contract, fulfil it, and survive were usually able subsequently to do good business, because once the Soviet bureaucrats trusted you, once they found that you did do good work so that they would not be blamed, they were naturally keener to trust you again and they had a greater incentive to allow some sort of decent profit margins on subsequent occasions, although they still expected you to bend over backwards at your own expense to put right anything that went wrong with the plant, usually because they had not trained the people well enough to run it. The biggest contract of this kind during my time was the contract for the building of four methanol producing plants to be built by the firm J. Davy, the counter trade arranged being that ICI would buy some of the methanol produced; this was a very large contract and took a very long time and frequent business visits to hammer out during which I and my staff gave moral support to the British negotiators by attending some of their more formal meetings with the Deputy Minister of Foreign

Trade and other officials concerned; a special feature here was that the Bank for Foreign Trade - the Soviet Bank for Foreign Trade - had an unusual idea; the British Merchant Bank arranging the financing, Morgan Grenfell, had worked out an ingenious scheme whereby the loan to the Soviet Union to allow them to buy the equipment - they were a very good risk in those days - would be in dollars; this was going to be more favourable to the British side, given the uncertainties of the pound sterling; the Bank for Foreign Trade did not like this because they counted on sterling depreciation allowing them to pay back a much smaller debt than it had originally been at the time of purchase - the dollar was more stable and it would therefore cost them more when they eventually repaid the debt. My Minister at the Embassy took us all to speak to the Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade about this; the Deputy Minister of Foreign Trade had obviously not been briefed about this by the Bank and he said, of course a debt in dollars has to be repaid in dollars naturally! As soon as we were outside the room the Bank of Foreign Trade Officials, who had been present, said "we don't care, we are going to repay in sterling anyway". It took months of sheer grind more than anything else to get them off this particular high horse, though they did have to come off in the end and they did have to repay in dollars; but it is a small example of the simple but very steep path that we had to spend our time climbing in order to make sales in the Soviet Union.

The living conditions in Moscow, were, of course, peculiar; they were privileged compared to those of ordinary Russians. Thanks to one of my predecessors the British Commercial Counsellor had the best flat in Moscow, the only one that had been made up of three original Soviet flats instead of the standard two which most foreign residents at least diplomatic ones enjoyed. We had the only flat in Moscow, to my knowledge, inhabited by foreigners which had a back and a front door because it consisted originally, as I said, of three separate flats and it had been arranged so that good use had been made of all the rooms; we no longer had three kitchens and three bathrooms the way it must have started out - a slight difference in floor level between the living room and dining room where an incautious guest could glissade a little was the only snag; otherwise the apartment furnished from the British side was very satisfactory. An incidental advantage was that it was on the 11th floor and the lift was poor and I kept fit by running up the stairs when I went home - when I left home I should have been able to go to my Office without ever having to venture outside, because it was in the same physical building but the

block of flats had been made part of a compound by means of cement walls linking the different blocks and there was now only one exit under the eye of a perpetually staffed police post. All these blocks of flats with exits to the compound were inhabited by western and eastern foreigners - communist and non-communist - they were all foreigners in Soviet eyes and, in fact, I could only reach my office by emerging past this police post on to the public street and walking round the outside of the compound to a door into the same building I had left a few minutes before, but on the opposite side of it, which was the door to the Commercial Office of the British Embassy. It was not in the main Embassy compound. The assumption was that everything was bugged and anything might be listened to, but one soon learned not to worry about this and one felt one was always going to avoid the obvious snags which would have been incautious gossip about the personal habits or affairs of one's staff or one's colleagues in one's own Embassy or other western or non-aligned Embassies. These western and non-aligned Embassies were the main social resource; it was impossible to have a completely natural friendship with Soviet citizens; even had it started naturally and had not been started by the KGB for their own ends it would not have remained natural for long, because the KGB would have been on to it; there is plenty of evidence of this, a little I could even offer personally, but it is a rather lengthy story. Otherwise the living conditions were tolerable; with good humour the main limitations, apart from the quality of food and so on, which one dealt with in various ways; the British Embassy was well looked after in this connection really. Apart from this, the main limitation was getting to know the country and its people; my wife found this and she soon found she was not the only one. It was during our time in Moscow that my wife and others formed a small group which founded the first International Women's Club in Moscow and no doubt in the Soviet Union; some wives of diplomats had in the previous few years become so depressed that they had committed suicide. The International Women's Club had to cope with many difficulties; it depended on friendly Ambassadors to provide large enough places to meet since any attempt to use Soviet buildings for the purpose meant that the meetings would be taken over and distorted by the Soviet officials; that was tried and that was found to be so. But the eager way that this was taken up by the spouses, usually wives, of the diplomatic and other personnel of the Embassies showed how much this was needed and we know from further contacts that

the International Women's Club in Moscow is still flourishing. I feel sure that it has saved a few more suicides, although I know that my knowledge of life in Moscow is completely out-of-date and that the hazards now are different.

RB: So you were next posted to Frankfurt as Consul General in 1979.

JH: That's right, at the very end of 1979. In fact, my last two posts after Moscow were Consular. First Frankfurt, for three and a half years, and then Morocco for almost the same length of time - Casablanca in Morocco. I must say the work was very different in the two places although it did have a common strand of commercial promotion. The Consulate General in Frankfurt did all the usual things that a Consular post does; it endeavoured to look after British citizens in trouble, it issued visas to bona fide applicants, it renewed British passports and so on and it maintained relations with a very large British community which lived in Frankfurt and surroundings - an interesting phenomenon that, not so much to do with Consular work, just that the fact that so many, about 10,000, in the Consular area of Hesse, in the Rhineland Palatinate and the Saar, were British citizens. So there were obviously 3-4,000 heads of families, shall we say, or individuals earning a pretty good living in Germany and that is something, no doubt, which will increase reciprocally as the EU matures. These people were very little trouble; they were a social and general asset. They had established themselves and looked after themselves. In Morocco, in Casablanca, one spent much more time looking after, not so much the British community, as British visitors who got into difficulty in one way or another although, of course, the majority of British visitors who go to Morocco have a splendid holiday. The commercial promotion is broadly the same in both countries except that in Morocco I would say that personal contact is more important - business with Germany is done on pretty rational commercial lines. We had a very busy Commercial Section with three full time Commercial Officers who spent most of their time not seeing British business men but reporting on very specific questions addressed to them through the Department of Trade from Britain where a given business man would proffer a detailed enquiry for which he had to pay a modest sum as to whether a given product or line of products, which were not yet being sold in Germany, had prospects and how good these might be; for the modest sum they paid, in my

opinion, they received the equivalent of a private consultants' report. It was based on numerous interviews with German businessmen who dealt with the product or the line concerned who would themselves indicate whether they were interested, and they sometimes were, in taking on the product under the right terms and who were very frank about why they thought the given product would not succeed or was too expensive or was already matched by local products or products from elsewhere or whatever. This service was much used. It kept these three capable officers busy. The basic commercial services just described, as provided by the commercial officers, allowed me and the Commercial Consul to concentrate on the cultivating of German business men who ran major purchasing departments or, indeed, were the heads of large firms. It was helpful that German people still have perhaps somewhat more respect for title and position than we have in Britain and certainly the very prominent business men, indeed, were remarkably willing to give one time and I had many interesting discussions with them, all of which helped me to give proper advice to British business, mostly through the Department of Trade or simply information passed on to London or to the Embassy. I need not talk about living conditions in Frankfurt on the Main in Western Germany. One unusual angle was that I and my UK based deputy plus my Canadian and French colleagues were able to make use of the PX - that is the complex of shops available to the American military in and around Frankfurt. Colleagues from other countries wondered why they could not have the same access; the arrangement was, in fact, a reciprocal one among those powers with forces in Germany; they had originally been, of course, occupying powers and then they became powers with forces stationed by agreement for the defence of Western Germany and Western Europe; so that American Consular and Embassy personnel in Bonn had access to the British NAAFI, the shops available to our Army of the Rhine and similar arrangements existed elsewhere in the former American Zone and in the former French Zone. In Morocco the trade promotion was also an important feature but it has to be admitted that during my time our scope was limited by the Moroccan foreign debt problem; important imports of tractors and other goods from Britain continued to happen but it was extremely difficult to broaden the field for our exports, given the sheer lack of foreign exchange. We can't go here into the major problem represented by the foreign debts of developing countries, but that was a major subject of discussion during my time.

As for the consular work the volume of British tourists and the sometimes unpredictable nature of events in Morocco did lead to a good deal of work on that side, not only by my UK Vice Consul but also by myself. In both commercial and consular work in Morocco I think that personal contact, even of a fleeting kind, even perhaps with Moroccans who would not or did not speak French in my case, even perhaps through an interpreter because I had no Arabic, we believed and indeed found, would make a difference. The mentality is, indeed, very different from the North European. One thing that seemed to me quite important was to be patient if you needed some kind of action from a Moroccan businessman or particularly from some kind of official; it was necessary to give them time - almost for its own sake - what I think this was that the local official believed that the recipient of this favour - in this case ourselves or the British citizen we acting for - would value the gesture more if they had to wait for it; which I am sure is perfectly good psychology. The trick sometimes was to persuade the British people in question that waiting was better than making a fuss, which it usually was. The rhythm of events was certainly different from Frankfurt most of the time although the Moroccans, like the Russians, were capable of acting with great speed if there was a sudden command from on high to do something and, indeed, they acted with remarkable efficiency considering. Living conditions in Casablanca were highly agreeable, although here again the Moroccan character needed to be taken account of with one's personal staff. Each foreigner, of course, who employs such staff has to evolve his own solution for his particular situation; the trait we found, was that Moroccan people did not find it too easy to co-operate with each other unless they already knew each other well and were accustomed to this - this may be a rather one-sided impression arising from our own experience and the experience of a few colleagues, but I think it is true to say that Moroccans have strong characters; they can be very hard workers and they do not take easily to being told to work with strangers, particularly if they think that the Moroccan stranger they have been asked to work with is trying to gain an advantage over them.

RB: Finally, I must ask you, looking back on your career, whether it has been a time of satisfaction and whether you feel that you have achieved something of the aims and objectives with which you set out when you first joined the Diplomatic

Service.

JH: Well, yes, certainly. On the whole I do feel that I have enjoyed my time; I have certainly had a very interesting time and that I have been able to do work that was worthwhile; of course, one can think of particular cases where one would have liked to have achieved more, where if one was doing it over again one would be cleverer, knowing what one knows now; but, of course, that is just a natural human characteristic. But I do feel it has been worthwhile and one just has the normal regret that one's accumulated 'savoir faire' cannot be used, not in the same field, because one is retired. I have enjoyed seeing a lot of different countries, something that was by no means commonplace when we all started out just after the war, and that is perhaps less of a privilege than it was. But I think the privilege of actually living and working in another country, rather than visiting them as a traveller or a tourist, is worth a great deal; one gains some depth of knowledge as well as width of knowledge. Whether this is more valuable than working all one's life in one place and thereby gaining a great depth of knowledge of a particular area and a particular field is something I must leave to others to think about.

[End of recording]