

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

YOUNG, Elisabeth Ann (Mrs Thomas Nesbitt Young)

MBE (1998)

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Mrs Elisabeth Young

interviewed by Malcolm McBain in Salisbury

on Monday 10 January 2011

Association with the Diplomatic Service

MM: Could we start by my asking you how you first came to be associated with the Diplomatic Service?

EY: I met my husband, Tom Young, in Ankara in 1969 when I was working at the Embassy. I was employed by the FCO as a secretary. Actually, I came from 'across the river' and worked in the Embassy in Ankara, which is where I met Tom, who was Third Secretary (Information) there.

MM: I see, but he himself had joined earlier?

EY: Yes he had joined earlier. It was his first post - he had joined straight from Oxford in 1966.

Posting to Ankara

MM: Right, so after you married what happened to your posting after that?

EY: I had to resign on the marriage in 1971, after the end of my posting, and went back with Tom as his wife for the first year of our marriage. So we were in Ankara for the first year of our married life.

MM: And was he still a third secretary?

EY: Yes I suppose he was. He was Assistant Information Officer and immediately after he arrived there was a state visit to Turkey by the Queen, and he was there for that. He had been a Turkish language student before he took up his posting.

MM: And then your next posting was ..?

Posting to Madrid, 1973-76

EY: It was Madrid. We said we would go anywhere, but we didn't really want to learn Spanish because we didn't want to go to South America. So they said we can't tell

you where it is and it is not South America but would you learn Spanish? So we went to Madrid and we were there from 1973 until 1976.

MM: And what was his job there?

EY: There he was working with Anthony Figgis who was the First Secretary (Commercial).

MM: Was there anything special about that particular period?

EY: Madrid was lovely actually, Spain was lovely. It was the baby post, I suppose. Our daughter was a few weeks old when we went there and our son was born there. And we had three and a half very happy years living in central Madrid but travelling all over the country, making the most of the wonderful surrounding countryside in central Spain.

Return to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1977

MM: Now, then after Spain you came back to the FCO.

EY: Yes - Tom was working on Pacific Independent Territories, which he did for only a short time. It was a tough time for us with two small children in London - he was commuting from Potters Bar where we had bought our first house. He wasn't particularly happy at the job, partly I think because in those days you had to share a room with people who smoked and he found that quite difficult. Anyway, he wasn't thrilled with life but at the beginning of 1978 they asked if he would go back to Turkey. The Ambassador wanted a new job which was again a Second Secretary job, but Tom was a Grade nine at that stage, and they said would he go back as a Second Secretary in Chancery. It was a newly created post. We resisted that somewhat because we had only been home for eighteen months, but he was a Turkish speaker and we had agreed that if something came up like that it was worth taking. So we went back to Ankara just eighteen months later, in May 1978.

Return to Ankara, 1978

MM: And how did you find Ankara?

EY: Oh it was different. It was less than five years since we had left, but it had changed quite a bit and of course we saw it through different eyes because we had children.

We travelled a lot all over Turkey on our first posting there, individually and together, so it was going to be different going back. And actually, it was good. Our daughter went to the little school there and it was much easier than living in Potters Bar I have to say (laughs).

MM: And were there Turkish children at the school?

EY: There were some Turkish children but because it was illegal to have a foreign school in Turkey, it had to be called a British Embassy study group and not many Turks could send their children there. It was very international and there were English teachers, so it was like a little English primary school – wonderful. And our son went to nursery school.

MM: Did you find Turkish society congenial?

EY: Oh yes, particularly if you have something of the language, and Tom had it fluently and I had some bits. It is a wonderful country for travelling in particular, we had Turkish friends. The year when we were first married and before we had children I worked for the Turkish Government editing English translations, so I had a bit of Turkish and when I went back I got involved with the BDSA – the Diplomatic Service Spouses and Family Association – it was the BDSA then - and I got involved there. And of course you get involved in your children's lives. So there was lots of tennis and picnics and helping with the Wives Association, helping people settle in who didn't have the local language and who didn't know how to get around. You can live wonderfully well in Turkey and you didn't have to have a lot of the language but it was useful to have some of it.

MM: Did you find that there were any constrictions on your life by virtue of the fact that Turkey is a Muslim country?

EY: Not particularly then, it was a much more secular society even than it is now. Things have changed a lot – it was essentially a secular society, particularly in Ankara and Istanbul. You obviously conformed. You didn't wear very short skirts in 1971 and you didn't wear shorts unless you were on the beach.

MM: You mean as a woman?

EY: Yes as a woman. And men didn't particularly either – the Turks just didn't think very much of people who wore shorts. I think one was sensible of the feelings of people, out in the villages particularly, where, although headscarves were illegal in Turkey and essentially still are, everybody covers up a lot even now. But you were sensitive to Muslim feelings so you didn't bare your arms in public, and you were particularly aware in the villages. The second time we were there I didn't travel quite so much because I had small children, but Tom used to travel everywhere in all sorts of ways looking for useful and interesting information and spreading the word about Britain.

MM: So he had an information job?

EY: The first posting was an information job; the second time was a commercial job, but it meant travelling around all over as well, even to the far East of Turkey.

MM: Oh really, remote regions?

EY: Remote regions, indeed yes, and he travelled locally, particularly the first time, although a little bit the second time as well. The first time we went over towards the Armenian border and travelled around there, showing films as one did, showing them locally and telling people about Britain. Once we stood on the border with Soviet Armenia where there is a very fine Armenian ruined town and you could hear the peasants, I suppose, on the other side. There were watch towers and things and we had a military escort at the time. You could hear the Armenians talking amongst themselves and it was very interesting because, subsequently we look back at that time, when we went onto the other side of that border and visited Armenia in 1994/95 when we were posted in Baku and we saw Mount Ararat from the other side. It was something we had always wanted to do and we didn't dream that the Soviet Union would collapse and that we would be able to do that, in so called 'free' Armenia.

MM: You said that you could hear the Armenians talking, could you understand what they were saying?

EY: No, they were talking in what was clearly not a Turkish language, it was an Armenian language but Tom was interested in languages and interested in how people were living on the other side.

MM: From observation?

EY: From observation and living – and also he was always interested in the Turkic people. We knew the Armenians weren't Turkic people but there were Turkic people in the Soviet Union so that was always interesting.

MM: And the Armenians are separate?

EY: They are indeed and their language is, not Indo-European, I don't know the roots of the Armenian language - it is a very ancient one but it is not Turkic.

MM: Had they gone there from the Levant?

EY: They have been pushed in. The Armenian people, I'm not sure of their racial origins but they are from that area, and of course they are Christians. They hadn't had a country of their own for a very long time until they had Soviet Armenia. There had been Armenian Kingdoms in the post Roman Greek periods but they had all been pushed and squashed up into central Armenia which hadn't, in fact still hasn't, got anything to offer, apart from a bit of agriculture. Armenia now subsists on remittances of money from the diaspora.

MM: Is that so?

EY: Yes, they haven't got any of their own natural resources.

MM: And have there been massacres of the Armenians in the past?

EY: There have been massacres of the Armenians, yes. The Armenians, like the Chinese in the Far East, are very industrious and very good at setting up business. They were spread throughout the Middle East, all over those countries and they did very well, and suffered in some of the ways that the Jewish people suffered. And in Turkey, of course, there were a lot of Armenians; there still are quite a lot of Armenians in Istanbul, but there are very few in other parts of Turkey now. When we were married and went to Lake Van, we went to look at Armenian churches throughout those strange parts of South West, South East Turkey - there are some very good books on the early Armenian church and the early Armenian history - and we went looking for quite a lot of these places and found some of the remnants of the Armenian people and some of the other Christians. The small Christian societies which were left, the Syriac Christians for instance, and we visited these small groups. I think virtually all of them have now emigrated to places like Sweden or Australia. In fact we helped

one Christian family – they came and saw us in Ankara and we helped them to get an interview with the Australian embassy. They emigrated to Australia. There were very few of them left – he was a teacher and there was no reason for him to stay in Turkey. They were semi-persecuted even then and it was no place for them to stay. So they moved away and now I believe there are virtually none of them. There are a couple of monasteries left which have appeared on various programmes on television, and the Syriac Christians, but they are very tiny communities. Very ancient too - the churches date from the 5th and 6th century.

MM: Physically, do they look European?

EY: Physically, they look like Turks. They are all very similar actually, like a lot of Armenians. You would be hard pushed to tell one from the other.

MM: Is there no difference in dress?

EY: There is a certain amount of difference in dress because in that part of Turkey a lot of the Muslim women are covered up. The Syriac Christian women are also covered up, but slightly differently. But there were so few of them and I would say there would be none left now. And it was very much still a society where marriages were arranged among Christians as well as among Muslims.

MM: Oh really ...

EY: Yes.

MM: Do you think there would be any problems with the Turks joining the European Union?

EY: I think it would be a very good thing if Turkey did join the European Union, because it is better to have them in than out. There is an enormous number of people there, I mean it is huge. I know people are worried about them flooding Europe but they are industrious in their own way. And I think large parts of Turkey, Istanbul and Ankara, are fairly civil societies, not fundamentalist in any way, but there is a very real danger of fundamentalism, which would be a very dangerous thing.

MM: In Turkey?

EY: In Turkey, yes. There are large numbers of Kurdish people who have moved to Istanbul, and Istanbul was by and large very much a secular society, although there are still vast numbers of Turks from all over, mixtures of people, because after all it was the capital of the Ottoman Empire, which brought in people from all over. So it's a complete melting pot and I think the Muslim voters are now in the majority, as was shown by the recent elections. When we visited - we were away from Turkey from 1981 until 1993 - and when we went back to Turkey in 1993 to visit for the first time on our way to Baku, we found it had changed quite a lot. The headscarf was obvious - we saw women in full chador. We saw women covered up in a way which you never saw in the early days when we were there. Visiting Trabzon in the East, which had been a large Christian place at the end of the Byzantine Empire and had retained a certain number of Christian people in 1993, was very strange. You couldn't sit out in a cafe as a woman, which you had done perfectly happily before. You were looked at rather strangely. Partly, I think, because a lot of people had come over from Russia at that time, after the fall of the Soviet Union, and it was full of Russian women of ill repute who had come in - they were able to get out of Russia and they came shopping in Trabzon and took a lot of stuff back to Russia. So most of the Western women who were there were probably thought of as prostitutes. It was not necessarily the same easy place it had been before and a lot of people were covered up. And you couldn't see wine in the shops, whereas Turkish wine was good and was always sold, but not any more in Trabzon. So it was quite interesting to see how things had changed a lot over time and how the population of Turkey had mushroomed, enormously. Istanbul had less than two million people in 1978 and it is now eleven million, so it is absolutely vast, and Ankara had mushroomed in the same way.

MM: How big was the population?

EY: It must be three or four million. But interestingly enough down in the south, Antalya, which was one of our favourite holiday destinations both times we were there, is now the third largest city in Turkey and that is partly because of tourism in the whole region. It is totally unrecognisable, whereas Ankara is still recognisable, although the Embassy of course is like a fortress now. It used to be a nice house and a nice place, but you go back now and there are tank traps and barbed wire and all sorts of things.

MM: Progress ...

EY: Progress, yes. But we had been there in 1979. There was a so-called revolution in 1980 and that was the last time that the generals and the army flexed their muscles and decided to threaten to force the resignation of the Prime Minister so it was quite an interesting time to be there. By that time Tom had become Head of Chancery - he had got his promotion and was First Secretary in Chancery in 1979. The revolution in 1980 was particularly interesting; Tom woke up and for some reason had the radio on. He had been telephoned by the Third Secretary (Information) to say that he was outside a Ministry building and thought that there was something happening. So Tom turned on the radio and there was martial music. He wasn't sure that they didn't have martial music every night, but he wasn't going to risk it so he decided to go into the Embassy, to walk in, because the next thing he heard was that there was going to be a curfew. So he decided to try and walk in to the embassy and he told the radio chap and the DWS man to go in as well. So I was at home with the children and he went off to the embassy and I didn't hear anything else because of course no communication was possible after that. He got into the embassy with the DWS man, they managed to get in, and of course the embassy is in the same compound as the residence, so the Ambassador was already in there. So he went to wake the Ambassador who was Peter Lawrence, and Tom told him that there had been a revolution. So he went back to the office to try and communicate with London and he saw a security guard at the door who asked him what was going on so he told him there had been a revolution. And the security guard asked "in England?" (laughter). So they obviously weren't expecting a revolution either. But in fact within 24 hours, well within 12 hours, people were allowed to go out and buy bread. There were tanks outside our house and all around - the military had taken control, which was great for the children because they didn't have to go to school and they enjoyed looking at tanks, and then they lifted the curfew for a couple of hours in the afternoon and you could go and buy bread, which was essential, and then within 48 hours it was all over. It had had its effect - the Government was forced to back down and it was the last time that the Turkish generals flexed their muscles. They don't have the same power now. You may have read in the papers recently that there is a trial going on and it is clear that a few years ago the military again tried to flex their muscles and failed, which shows that the balance of power has shifted.

MM: Shifted from the military?

EY: The military are always there in the background and have been ever since Ataturk took over in the 1920s so this is a big change - they don't have the power anymore.

MM: So what was the effect of their power?

EY: Well in 1980 they forced the resignation of the Government.

MM: And was the introduction of the new civil Government?

EY: It was always civil, yes, but the military were always able to sit in the background as the power. But gradually since then the civilian society has received more Islamic influence. There is a lot more influence from religion now than there was before and it has become less secular over time. I suppose the influence and thoughts of Ataturk who set it all up have waned. But it has been slow and of course it is economics that drive it forwards, and the military are thought of as dinosaurs now. And of course while we were there the second time the Iranian revolution took place in 1979. That was an interesting time to be there because Turkey was part of the Central Treaty Organisation and that collapsed immediately after the Iranian revolution.

MM: Was Iran in CENTO?

EY: Yes and Turkey and Pakistan. I can't remember the exact make-up of CENTO, but we had a large presence of British military in CENTO, and American military. And I must say that the military always contributed a lot to embassy life and work in those places and they were always very helpful and a good lot of people to have around. NATO was there too of course, they are still a member of NATO, but it was a smaller office and presence, not like the CENTO presence.

MM: That was the principal organisation?

EY: Yes, that was called the Central Treaty Organisation and I can't remember all of the countries, there were three or four countries, but there was a lot of military co-operation.

MM: I suspect Turkey was the main country involved.

EY: Turkey, Britain, America and I think it was Pakistan and Iran.

MM: France?

EY: No, not France. They weren't even in NATO at that point either.

MM: Ok so that was Ankara and then your next posting was?

EY: New York.

Assignment to British Trade Development Office, New York, 1981

MM: Where Tom was Deputy Director of the British Trade Development Office.

EY: Yes. We arrived in January 1981 and the inspectors came in February 1981. By May his job had been inspected out. We had spent two months finding somewhere to live and finding a school, which is what you have to do – you have to find somewhere to live before you can find a school. We lived in upstate New York, in Scarsdale, because we couldn't find anywhere to live in Manhattan on what they allowed us. So we went to Scarsdale and there were good local schools. Tom commuted - he didn't see the children very much but it was a nice little area. But the job was inspected out so we had to wait and find out what was going to happen. In August I went home with the children because we hadn't had time to go back for leave between postings.

MM: You mean in the UK?

EY: Yes. I went back to the UK for a holiday with the children in the summer of 1981 and it was then that they offered Tom the job in Washington. It was a Trade Policy job which meant moving the children again. So he insisted, the one time he put his foot down, that we were not prepared to go to Washington, if we were not guaranteed a house, if we had to spend two months looking for a house and for a school. So they guaranteed us his predecessor's house in Washington, which was fairly unusual I suppose, but which meant that we could find a school right away. We chose to send them to a private school, because we felt that three schools in nine months was a bit tough on them. It was too much for a girl of seven and a five year old. So they went to the private school and it was very successful. I was a bit annoyed because I had just found a voluntary job at the Metropolitan museum but for everybody else it was great to move to Washington. I wasn't thrilled, but when I got there it was fine; there were things to do and I became secretary of the British Embassy Wives association, which was 370 strong.

MM: 370 wives?

EY: Yes, but not all FCO obviously. The number encompassed all the military, all the people from the different ministries who were represented there, each of which had their own little organisation of 30-40 wives, but this was an umbrella group which met once a month. It was good. I was secretary and later on I became chairman which was a good thing to do. The children were occupied at school, Tom was busy and we did quite a bit of travelling. We lived in central Washington DC and he could cycle to work and travel around and we enjoyed Washington very much after that.

MM: I bet.

EY: Yes.

MM: And when you say job, do you mean it was a paid job?

EY: My job? No, it wasn't paid. It was a voluntary job but there was quite a lot to do and it meant doing all sorts of things, including meeting all the wives. When we were in Spain and subsequently in Turkey I taught cooking at home, because I have some knowledge in that area, and I thought that I might do that in Washington but I didn't. There are lots of interest groups in Washington – you could get very occupied and I did just that. And I had a garden, which I enjoyed and of course you have to be around for your children.

MM: And did Tom need to do a lot of entertaining?

EY: Yes, quite a lot of entertaining. We entertained at home. I like cooking so we had dinner parties. They had lunches in New York, a lot of entertaining was done at lunch time, so we didn't do a lot of entertaining in the evening in New York. We weren't there for long enough, but we did a lot of entertaining in Washington. We were there until the summer of 1984 so we had plenty of time. And we travelled quite a lot during the holidays - mostly on holiday. Of course Tom travelled for work but I didn't travel with him because of course I couldn't with the children, but he had to travel quite a bit which he enjoyed too. Of course if you are in Washington it is easy to get out for weekends too - it is a nice place. We bought a pop up camper van from somebody in the Embassy, which we sold back to them at the end having driven all the way across the States and back and further south as well. And we camped around Washington in the summer too. We used it quite well – it was lovely.

MM: Was it a good life?

EY: A good life, yes. It was good there until we had a rather unfortunate robbery, which was a robbery with violence, in our house. That must have been 1982. It involved people with guns, so that was not a happy event.

MM: How did they get in?

EY: We had been to a party to welcome the new Ambassador - Tom had his bicycle as he had been at work but I had taken the car and joined him. So I drove home and let the baby sitter go. There were three embassy houses in a row and we were in the middle one. The babysitter was the son of the people who lived on one side and I got home and let him go home. I then went downstairs to the basement and the door was open at the back, which seemed odd. But I thought while I was there I would put the rubbish out. Unfortunately, obviously somebody had been in already because when I went to put the rubbish out, somebody jumped on me with a gun and forced me back inside. I was worried about the children and about Tom. The children were fast asleep but Tom hadn't yet come home. Obviously they were looking for something – they were young, black and unemployed. I don't know how many of them there were. They just took everything they could possibly take, which wasn't much. Tom came back in the middle of it and we were both tied up and they left eventually having taken clothes and things like that, cameras. Fortunately, most of our silver was at the Embassy because we had left it there when we went to England and hadn't brought it home, but some treasured things went. Fortunately for us there was a bit of cash around so they took that and although I had been hit by this gun initially it wasn't too bad. Tom came home and was tied up and we raised the alarm afterwards. The Embassy were very good - the American security people came, because there was an organisation who looked after diplomatic security there. And whenever Tom went away again they would come and do a patrol and check things. But there had been a series of similar robberies by these young people who were from not poor backgrounds but who were unemployed and just took their parents' cars and went off and did this. So that was not very pleasant at all and I was worried about the children more than anything.

MM: But the children were not harmed?

EY: My daughter was woken up by them but my son never woke up. He was fast asleep. But the police were very good - they took his fingerprints and let him join in with it in a way, which was very good for him psychologically. But it wasn't a very pleasant experience and it was the only real violence we ever came across throughout our career.

MM: Was it?

EY: Yes. We have been through revolutions and things like that and never had any problems - in Africa too, we never had any problems. So yes that was unfortunate and of course we all got house alarms after that and the doors were always bolted. But we survived and we had three and a half years in the States altogether and left in the summer of 1984 and our children came back to school in the UK. They had been at American schools for three years. But they had never been to school in England and we thought they needed to. Our daughter was ten by then and the school agreed that she could come for a year in the junior school before going to the senior school. So on one of our trips Tom spent time giving her maths tuition in the back of the car whilst I drove, because her American maths was a bit below the standard for the UK. But she was mathematically minded – she did maths at O' level and later did statistics at Oxford so it didn't impede her in any way. I think the American education was fine up to a point. I don't think either of them were particularly interested in English history, they knew more about American history, more about the Red Indians and President Reagan, the war of Independence and the discovery of America than they did about home. I think that eventually it pans out equally after the first year of university but they certainly needed a bit of tuition, and our son chose to go to prep school at the same time as his sister so that he didn't get left behind.

MM: Prep school in England?

EY: Yes in England, near Cambridge where his grandparents lived. So that was very convenient. And our daughter Harriet was not far away.

MM: So they went there in 1984?

EY: No it was 1983, because they had one year at school before we went home. So they went in September 1983 and we left Washington in June 1984.

Return to FCO in 1984

MM: So you settled back into life in England?

EY: Yes. At that time we bought a house in Hammersmith. We arrived in summer 1984 and expected to have two and a half years but it didn't last that long. We had less than two years because in December 1986 they asked if we would go to Accra, Ghana. Tom was offered promotion to Accra, to go as Deputy High Commissioner.

Assignment as Deputy High Commissioner, Accra, Ghana, 1987

MM: How did you find that?

EY: I enjoyed it. It was climatically very difficult, but I enjoyed the Tropics. I had been in the Far East myself before we met so I liked the tropical climate and Accra turned out to be a lovely place.

MM: Where had you been before that was tropical?

EY: I had been in Borneo, in Brunei and Labuan, in 1964 to 1966, 18 months during Confrontation. It was my first post.

MM: So what were you actually doing in Brunei?

EY: My boss was on the Deputy High Commissioner's staff in Jesselton but we were with the military in Brunei, at the military headquarters, but that is not something I can talk about. I enjoyed that, but going to Africa was something that I wanted to do. Tom had always wanted to go because he had spent part of his gap year following Oxford in Uganda working in the South West of the country doing a VSO sort of job and he thoroughly enjoyed it and always wanted to go back. He kept asking for postings in the under-developed Far East or Africa and never getting them – getting places like New York instead. So finally when the opportunity came up to go to Ghana he jumped at it, and it was a good job and he enjoyed doing it very much. We travelled all over Ghana, as much as possible. The children were at boarding school so we had more opportunities to travel and there was a lot more to do. I got quite involved in voluntary and charity work but we still travelled a lot.

MM: Where did you live?

EY: We lived in a house called 'Devonshire House' which is the Deputy High Commissioner's House. It was very nice but neglected, both the house and the garden were neglected, so there was a huge amount to do. I did things like making huge curtains because I decided that I could do a better job than they did locally. So that was good and I was paid at a local rate which was barely £1 for each length of curtain, but it was worth it for the finished result. And I did a lot of gardening – I love gardening and I got the garden going. I planted a lot of palm trees, which are still there – the garden is still there.

MM: Have you been back recently?

EY: I haven't – I have never been back to Ghana. I would like to go back but people don't tend to go back there and the last friends have now left so I don't know anybody there. It isn't a tourist destination particularly, which is why I have never been back. But I would like to go back – I would like to see what has happened to the garden, where the people are who worked for us - whether they are still around – most of them are I suspect. We were there interestingly enough when the famous dispatch, I think it was Kelvin White, somebody wrote a dispatch about HIV and AIDS – it was in 1987 I believe and was a landmark as it was when AIDS first came across our horizon – the first time we met it and it was just beginning to show up in the hospitals in Ghana. I did a lot of work with neo-natal care with various clinics that were set up in the townships and the slums around. But Accra was a good place – there were lovely beaches close by and we went every weekend to the beach.

MM: Didn't somebody drown there?

EY: Before we got there somebody from the military drowned, yes. In fact somebody from the High Commission went to help someone who was in difficulty, and that was around 1985/86. It was dangerous to swim there – you didn't swim particularly as the sea was very heavy but it was very good for just getting wet and there was the tropical beach to enjoy.

MM: Who was the High Commissioner?

EY: Arthur Wyatt was there for the first year and then it was Anthony Goodenough. We arrived just as the new building for the High Commission was opened. So we didn't have to go into the old building, which was fairly grim I believe. But as soon as we got there a visa regime was introduced, which meant that already the building was inadequate as there was no visa section. They had to immediately hire another office for the visa section, which is the sort of thing that inevitably happens with Embassy buildings – they become too small for their occupiers. I think that West Africa, or sub-Saharan Africa, was coming out of a very severe drought. Before we arrived I think everything was imported, even down to eggs. But by the time we got there, a bit more was available locally. I grew a lot in the garden and we used a lot of local produce. And gradually while we were there we had to import less and less. But we did still import a lot by sea – we had a large store room.

MM: Did you get the impression that Ghana was an under-developed country?

EY: It was to some extent. Of course they had had several revolutions and Jerry Rawlings had become head of state for the second revolution, so our relations with Ghana were still slightly difficult. But the Ghanaians are delightful people – very easy going.

MM: But it had been a great success before independence?

EY: It had yes, and indeed it is a great success now. Things have much improved and the natural resources are enormous – they have the gold, they haven't succeeded very much with oil, even offshore, but they have succeeded greatly with things like palm oil, and they have lots of land to grow things such as pineapples. But it is not easy because they are sub Saharan – the north of the country has a lot of droughts and Accra itself is in a rain shadow. There are some very tropical areas and some very dry areas. But it is a success and democracy seems to have returned in a good way. The last elections were very successful and I do believe that they are on the road to prosperity. Unfortunately, they have Côte d'Ivoire next to them, which does cause some problems.

MM: But Côte d'Ivoire was also a success, an enormous success story ...

EY: It was indeed – it was the place to go to from Accra because they had everything. I worked for UNICEF later on in Ghana, I ran their Greetings Cards operation for Christmas and Birthday cards – I organised that for UNICEF in Ghana for two years,

which was a good and enjoyable thing to do. And I went on a conference to Abidjan, which was like paradise really, but unfortunately things have gone downhill since then.

MM: Since they got rid of the French basically ...

EY: Yes, but I don't think the French have left a particularly good legacy. We also covered Togo, which is the other side of Ghana and we went to Togo regularly. There was an honorary British Consulate there and we spent time there but that was not the great success that Cote d'Ivoire had been and there was still a very heavy French presence – the head of police was still French at that time. But things went downhill a lot in Togo after we left Ghana and I think it is still in a bad way. Ghana was beginning to come up and the two countries on either side have gone downhill.

MM: What would you put that down to?

EY: I think the French have got a lot to answer for, because they retained a lot of influence and until recently of course they still sent in French troops. They didn't train people up – the chiefs of police were still French in the late 1980s and they had control themselves so they didn't allow the Togolese to balance out their tribal problems. It's tribal there – it was tribal in the Gold Coast when we first went there, it is tribal now in Côte d'Ivoire and it was tribal then in Togo.

MM: Are there separate tribes?

EY: Yes – the northern and the southern tribes, rather like Nigeria. I think the French used the tribes a lot to balance out the influence of one tribe against the other and had a Frenchman in between heading the police or the military. So none of these tribes needed to get along together because there was always something knocking their heads together. I think the problems still remain. In Côte d'Ivoire it is the northerners against the southerners and in Ghana there had been problems with the Ashanti and the people on the coast, right from the times of slave trading. But they seem to have sorted things out in Ghana and I would ascribe that to some extent to the colonial methods. I don't think they were that bad, although some may disagree with that. It started a bit like Zambia, except that Zambia had slightly different problems because it was part of the Federation – and Zambia was our last post.

MM: We will get onto that later. Anyway, from Accra you went to Australia, didn't you?

EY: Yes, to Canberra. There were various possibilities that came up – Singapore, but the Director of Trade Promotion came up and that seemed like a good job so we went there.

Director of Trade Promotion in Australia, 1990

MM: And was it a good job?

EY: It was a good job but Australia was a bit like a holiday. It was lovely but Tom was Director of Trade Promotion in a country of 17 million people so the job was never going to be vitally important. The market was small and possibly Sydney, which is where the Director of Trade Promotion now sits, was the better place to be for trade in Australia. But at the time the then High Commissioner wanted the Director to be in Canberra so that is where it was. But it was lovely for travelling – Tom went all over the place. We only did two years there so we didn't even get home leave when we were there as we hadn't done two years when the offer came for the next job.

MM: Who was the High Commissioner there?

EY: The High Commissioner when we first arrived was John Coles for the first year, who then came home to be PUS and then it was Brian Barder.

MM: So John Coles insisted on Canberra did he?

EY: Yes, and it was probably a good thing that it did subsequently go to Sydney because that is where the trade was, although Melbourne would have objected. Another reason for it being in Canberra was that it was neither in Sydney nor Melbourne and they couldn't complain, because they both think that they are important.

MM: Well they are both more important than Canberra ...

EY: Yes, but Canberra is easy for travelling all over and you are near Government. Anyway it was lovely – I thoroughly enjoyed Canberra. I did the cooking again, did all sorts of things and played a lot of tennis. The children thought that Ghana was the best posting we ever had – they had a wonderful time, they met people on the plane coming out for the holiday, had brilliant beach holidays and then went back to school. Australia was a long way away.

MM: And were they still at school in England?

EY: Yes they were still at school in England. Our daughter had finished school and she came out to Australia for her gap year. But our son was still at school and he found the journey got longer each time because then you had to fly into Sydney or Melbourne and change onto a little plane to fly to Canberra. Now big international flights can go into Canberra but it was not the case when we were there. And actually when we were still in Ghana the Berlin Wall came down and things started happening and we had been in Australia for less than a year when Tom telephoned the Office when the Soviet Union began to break up and said ‘I’m a Turkic speaker and I would be interested in parts of the Caucasus and parts of the Soviet Union where we might want representation’ and the Office said they were never going to open up a mission there! He did that shortly after we opened up in the Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, because of course we had never broken off relations there. So we opened up there and he thought maybe there is something in the Caucasus and maybe I can see the other side of Mount Ararat. But they said no we’re not going to be opening up there. And then a year later in January 1993 they telephoned and asked if he would be interested in opening the Embassy in Baku? We were out to lunch and we came home and he said ‘what do you think about going to Baku?’ I barely knew where it was at that stage but I knew he couldn’t turn it down. It was just the sort of thing that he was going to be interested in so we said yes. The difficulty was getting ourselves out of Canberra. The High Commissioner, Brian Barder, was reluctant to let us go until Tom got a successor, but he had to let us go in March, because Tom needed to begin turning his Turkish into Azerbaijani to prepare to go to Baku in the summer. So we left Canberra in March 1993.

Posting as Her Majesty’s Ambassador, Baku, 1993

MM: So you were on your way to Azerbaijan ...

EY: We made a reconnaissance visit there in June 1993. We already had Harold Formstone who was implanted in the BP head office in Baku. He had a broom cupboard in the BP office where he was starting off British relations with Azerbaijan. The reason for opening up in Baku was oil – it was purely commercial. So we went out to visit to see what was possible. Harold was living in a hotel. There was no office as such. We arrived on a Saturday in June and couldn’t understand why we couldn’t find a

restaurant that was open. It so happened that the President of Azerbaijan, who was an academic, was in the process of being overthrown and we had arrived at the beginning of a small revolution. The President actually fled and an opposition Colonel marched on Baku. He wasn't going to take charge – there was a standoff and subsequently the father of the current President, Heydar Aliyev, who had been a Politburo member in Moscow and had fallen foul of Gorbachev, had returned to Nakhichevan, which is the part of Azerbaijan from which he came. He returned there in a sulk and was then asked if he would come to Baku to be President of Azerbaijan. So we arrived on a very inauspicious day, and stayed for just a weekend. We flew in with BP on a charter flight and we flew out with BP just two days later. So that was just to see how things were. That was the beginning of our knowledge of Baku. We then went home to London to carry on with the preparations and went in at the beginning of September. The only way to get there on a commercial airline was via Turkey so we flew on Turkish airlines, stayed for a few days in Istanbul, as our son was there doing an archaeological dig, and we left our baggage in the consulate general in Istanbul. We didn't have a lot of co-operation from them; they were very difficult. The Consul General was not co-operative at all. It was extraordinary because we had to have a special seat on the plane. We had 40 kg of diplomatic bags with us which included 30,000 dollars in cash because there was no bank in Azerbaijan and trying to leave it all in Istanbul for a few days was not easy. But it worked and the bags contained the seals and the basic things you needed for starting up an Embassy, including mourning stationery and a condolence book, for the Queen Mother at that stage. That is one of the items you take in at the beginning. We arrived in Baku early in September. We moved into a hotel – Harold Formstone had found two rooms in a hotel – the old Intourist hotel in Baku - which had been lived in by the American Ambassador, who had by then found an embassy building because they had been established a little bit longer. These two rooms became our office and he had also found a sort of serviced apartment in a block of flats which belonged to the Communist Party – it was where they put up party members in the old days. So we moved into the 8th floor and above us were the Pakistani UN Representative, the Israeli Ambassador, the Iranian Ambassador, the Greek Ambassador and the Chinese Ambassador. We all lived in the same block and we used to go up and down in the lifts together – sometimes with the Israeli and the Iranian in the same lift – it was extraordinary. The office was in the Intourist hotel, along the corridor from the Russians and the Chinese, so it was an

interesting place to start up. But of course there was nothing – communication was via a satellite laptop and to begin with you had to go onto the roof to set up the satellite. Shortly after we arrived they sent somebody to sort out the satellite, so we had a satellite fax and phone and then somebody came out to do some secure communications, which couldn't have been terribly secure. We were in a hotel which was locked up overnight and it was quite an interesting exercise. I became locally engaged, there was Tom and one Grade 9 who came out, soon followed by a Grade 10. Then a Grade 7 appeared as we had to set up a mission. We had to find locally engaged people - Harold had a driver who was previously a paediatrician but found he was better paid as a driver, but he was a dangerous driver so we had to find another driver. The flag car was a LADA to begin with, until the other cars could arrive. Then we engaged a PA – it was not difficult to find young women who had good English but they didn't have any knowhow or expertise on running an office and in the FSU the telephone was seen as an enemy so you didn't ever pick up the phone with good expectations. It was treated as an enemy and they would pick up the phone and say 'hello'. We then had to teach them to say 'Good morning, this is the British Embassy, how may I help you?' You had to literally start from that sort of basic information. Nobody knew how to set up an office, install a filing system or anything. So we had a driver, an admin officer and a PA, and we then got another young woman to help run the office and deal with public relations, to work with the Azeri government. They had to speak Azerbaijani and Russian, because a lot of things went on in Russian. But the government wanted to use the Azerbaijani language, which at that time was written in Cyrillic – it has been changed into a Latin alphabet now. I found that difficult because I could use the language a bit. But my Cyrillic wasn't brilliant so I couldn't read it. Tom managed to. It was quite an interesting time – our Embassy went in speaking Azeri and most of the others, for example the Chinese, the Americans and the Russians, had to have double interpretation because the Government and the President would talk in Azeri, which was then translated into Russian, which was then translated into their own language. So we did have an advantage given that Tom could understand and communicate well in the language from the beginning, could know what was happening in speeches particularly and with the press.

MM: Is there much association between Turkish and Azeri?

EY: Yes. Azeri is a corrupt form of Turkish in fact. It is quite basic, not as sophisticated as Turkish, and that was particularly useful when we went back to Turkey because Azeri speakers sounded very uncouth. We realised some time later that our caretaker in Ankara must have been Azeri because he spoke this very corrupt form of Turkish. So we had an office and a Residence, which were within walking distance of each other, but the next thing was to find a more permanent place to be. In fact it took twenty months to find and establish an Embassy and a Residence.

MM: Was that surprising?

EY: No. Part of the problem was that we found a house that we thought would be good but people from London said that it was too big and would be insecure. Yet it would have been very good to find a nice old building, because there were many old buildings from the oil boom years in the early 1900s. It would have been quite a lot of work but it would have taken us less time than it subsequently did. But we eventually found the wing of an old hotel, a Stalinist period hotel, and they were prepared to let it to us. It was being reconstructed at the time, so we went in at the beginning - the Mission was downstairs and the Residence was upstairs. It wasn't going to be big enough but it was as big as we were allowed. In fact, I think within two or three years of us leaving they had to find a new place because it wasn't big enough. But that is just the way these things go.

MM: Were there suitable buildings around?

EY: There were but they didn't have any good facilities in them – they would have needed to be gutted and re-done. But there were many old buildings, particularly in the old town, but they might not have been secure in today's terms. We were busy trying to get started, because of course nobody has written a handbook on how to open a small Mission. I became locally engaged, because there was nothing else for me to do and certainly the American wives were employed in their Embassy. So I became locally engaged in the office, and helped to teach people how to set up the filing system and show people how to deal with people – we had to start from scratch. In the meantime it was September and it was getting cold – winter was coming on. Our heavy luggage was on its way, our own Land Rover Discovery and the official Land Rover Discovery were also on their way in a container, but unfortunately nobody in London believed that you couldn't get these things through by road. There was a war going

on in Georgia so you couldn't drive from Turkey through Georgia to Baku and our stuff got stuck on the Turkish border. We were getting cold – there were occasional BP charter flights and they helped to keep us going - I went home with them in November and managed to buy some winter clothes because we didn't have any. Finally Tom got really annoyed and rang London, and it was actually Roger Short on the other end of the phone, to say what are you going to do about this? We had spoken to people who had said yes, the container is in Turkey, watch this space. But we weren't prepared to watch any space at that stage because it was ridiculous, the situation had become intolerable. The FCO had in the end to charter an Antonov plane to lift the stuff from Turkey and take it via Russia to Azerbaijan. But the stuff had been impounded in Turkey, because it had been there for so long, so they had to negotiate its release. It was then flown by Antonov at vast expense, something like £12,000 at least, via Russia to Azerbaijan and it was just plonked. There were no facilities for getting the cars off the plane, just two planks of wood and a man with a cigarette standing at the foot of the plane. So Tom had to go onto the plane and reverse the Land Rovers along with our belongings off the back of the plane. We subsequently had some office equipment flown in and again it was just dumped onto the runway, because there were no facilities and no handling. But most things survived and we then had vehicles at least and winter clothes. Nobody seemed to be aware of what the difficulties were – we were there to solve the problems but we also had problems to get through and we had to do it all ourselves. Gradually we learned. There is no handbook on what you are supposed to do. They assume in London that a small mission can do what every big mission does and that you would just look at your DSP – Diplomatic Service Procedure - to find out how to do it. But there was no such thing. Going to the bank with your 30,000 dollars to put it in, you went with your driver, and hoped that nobody would take it from you on the way.

MM: And did the banks accept dollars?

EY: Oh yes, the best currency to use was dollars. To begin with we only used dollars, until we needed to use the local currency. The so-called international bank was not an international bank at all, so it had to be cash that you deposited and could then take out and use, and there wasn't any problem about that. But it was getting it organised and you had to pay people in dollars as well. We had a satellite fax in the office and one day it clattered into life and a fax came through asking 'where is your burial

report?’ A response went back by fax saying ‘What is a burial report’, and back came another fax saying ‘Consult your DSP chapter whatever it is ..’. And back went the fax saying ‘We do not hold DSP, please tell us’. A burial report, as we learned, is what local facilities are available if a British subject dies – is there cold storage, what are the local undertakers like and of course there is nothing, you just bury them. So we gradually put in place what we could do, and subsequently there was a small mission handbook. But not for us, not in our time, we had to learn literally from scratch. And we gradually set up the secure communications.

MM: So did you actually have secure communications?

EY: Yes. In the hotel they weren’t particularly secure. We had small pads, not like the old ‘one time’ pad, but there were some new facilities, I can’t remember the name of the system they used, but it was done by email. So there began to be a system and by the time we got into our own Mission and we had a strong room and everything else, then there was a secure system.

MM: How did you get hold of a strong room?

EY: They had to come out and build it. They sent people out to work on that and then to set up the secure system. And it worked reasonably well. By then there was at least one other spouse and we shared the job and then she did the job and I gave up. But for two years we were doing it ourselves. And of course because it was a strong room it was like being back at work – there were about five different combinations to go through and it was pretty secure. But there were very few of us doing it and believe it or not within eighteen months we were inspected and the inspectors decided to cut part of my job – part of the job of the locally engaged spouse. But how can you cut half a job when there is nobody else – you had to do the accounts, the communications, the registry and all the secure work of the mission, and you couldn’t have a non UK locally engaged employee within the secure area. So in fact you couldn’t cut half of the job, so this idea was thrown out. But it seemed like the easiest thing to do – to cut half of the job of a locally engaged person who is being paid more than the other locally engaged workers because they have to be in the secure area. That was ridiculous, to have inspectors in when we were still living partly in a hotel, it was nonsense, but that was the rule I suppose. You were inspected after so long and that was the rule. But I think there were far too many people trying to impose

regulations on something that needn't have been to comply with a system designed for much bigger organisations. They were imposing things as they saw it from London.

MM: Well they thought that you could do everything that a full-sized mission could, but without the staff.

EY: Yes. And with staff that had no concept of how a Mission would run – they had no idea. They were all used to not taking responsibility, because the communist system meant that you never accepted responsibility for anything. So if you asked somebody where such and such a letter was, which you knew that they had typed and posted, they would reply that they did not know. Because to accept that they knew where it was meant that they might get the blame. Whereas all you wanted to know was where the copy of the letter was and where had it been filed. So we had to teach them to take responsibility for those things and that they wouldn't get the sack if something wasn't right. So working on something as basic as that was really quite interesting. To see how people thought.

MM: It sounds highly frustrating, to put it mildly.

EY: Yes, but they were lovely people and once you got through to them, they were fine and they would accept it and become as efficient as anybody else.

MM: It was a question of teaching them. So how long were you there?

EY: We were there from September 1993 until summer 1997, so nearly four years. As it happened, there were difficulties finding somebody to take over from Tom, as it was deemed that the posting was not suitable for children. Although other missions had people with children there, the FCO decided that it wasn't suitable so a couple of successors fell by the wayside for that reason. At that stage of course, they weren't asking for applicants, they were appointing people still and they didn't have anybody with the relevant expertise. In the end, the person who took over from Tom was Roger Thomas, D. R. Thomas. Have you talked to him?

MM: Not yet ...

EY: He would have lots to say. He was in Turkey with us the second time, he was Consul in Ankara and he already had Turkish as well, so he did as Tom did and turned his

Turkish into Azeri. He moved into our house and into the office. It was under Roger that they began to look for something else. Our daughter lived with us for a while in Baku – she came out after she graduated and worked for an NGO – she worked for UNICEF and Oxfam and various other people. There was a large, internally displaced population from the wars with Armenia so there were a lot of refugee camps. I did a lot of work with disabled people in orphanages and care homes. In fact I did a lot of work there – I got the MBE for that. People didn't know anything about charities or giving – if anybody was disabled either physically or mentally they were put away under the Soviet system. But when the Soviet Union fell apart the conditions in the orphanages and the care homes were appalling, like Romania, only worse. The American Ambassador's wife and I founded an international women's club group, which was half international member, half Azeri members. The idea was that the Azeri women could learn about charitable work and become interested in helping and doing things. None of them had ever seen any of these places or knew what they were like – they had no idea what went on in these care homes, which were horrendous. It was difficult not to throw up sometimes going into them.

MM: How about contact with the Government?

EY: Yes, there was lots of contact.

MM: How did Tom do it?

EY: Tom could see the President regularly if he wanted to.

MM: Directly?

EY: Yes, directly, and talk in Azeri. He did interviews and things in Azeri and he had a lot of contact with the press. There were Presidential elections not long after we arrived - they were probably not free and fair, but the President probably would have won anyway. There were two small attempts at revolutions, because the opposition were kept down in a big way. It was a very heavy-handed Soviet style Government, which gradually crushed the opposition and has now totally crushed it. Some of the opposition I believe have now gone over to work for the government, because it is so wealthy and so corrupt that they couldn't withstand it. It was fairly horrendous. It was fairly 'Wild West' when we first got there - there were lots of guns and lots of things going on. The President's son, who is now the President, was one of those who

frequented casinos and things. He was elected as President after his father died. The President's son-in-law was the Ambassador in London, and he was a bag carrier essentially, with the money.

MM: To be banked in London?

EY: Wherever, really. Huge amounts of money, from oil. I think most of the oil companies must be in on it in some way - I can't imagine that they are clean.

MM: Do you mean BP and Shell?

EY: I shouldn't say that should I?

MM: No, not really. But which companies were there at the time?

EY: BP, yes. Shell came a bit later, but there was a company called Ramco. There were a lot of small oil industry servicing companies and a lot of big American companies. It was Amoco that was there first and then of course BP took them over. When we first went there they were negotiating the first oil deal. And that of course was the first drilling for new oil. There had always been oil drilling, there was lots of oil around and had been since the end of the nineteenth century, but it was not efficiently done. The Soviet Union had played that down, because Azerbaijan was designated under the Soviet Union to make chemicals – there was a huge chemical complex which was pretty disastrous environmentally and there were lots of birth defects as a result of this. The other things they made were refrigerators for the whole of the Soviet Union and some wine - most of the Russian champagne was from Azerbaijan. Then of course Gorbachev tried to stop people from drinking so they stopped buying champagne from Azerbaijan and a lot of people lost money. Nobody wanted Azeri refrigerators, because they weren't very good and the chemical industry was incredibly inefficient. Oil was the alternative. The Soviet Union divided and ruled - they got their oil from elsewhere and they didn't want the Azeri oil industry to be well developed. But obviously as soon as they gained independence Azerbaijan wanted the oil out. So they put it out to tender and a number of different oil companies were bidding for the first oil licences.

MM: Was it a licence to drill?

EY: Yes, it was the first oil agreement, which would allow you to drill. Sectors were divided up and people got different percentages. In fact it was well over a year after we arrived when the first oil agreement was signed. And again, dividing and ruling, BP and Amoco were doing it. Effectively at the beginning it was run by BP – the head was a BP man. A new company was formed with a range of different oil companies. The head was BP, the second was Amoco and they formed a new company with all these different people coming together. Subsequently, BP took over Amoco, so the partnership was just one, but there were other little sections as well. Of course, the Government had a huge part of this. The State oil company, SOCAR, was huge. It is like the oil industry really and the man who headed that had the biggest cut of all. But he subsequently lost his job, as they all did, because he wasn't giving enough to the Government I suppose. They didn't put much into the infrastructure – the money was going into people's pockets and into the banks. It was very difficult to get people to spend money on orphanages, for example, but they were shamed into it to some extent by the actions of other people. And the oil companies started doing charitable things as well. But then lots of other service companies came in. So having started with only eight British people for the first ministerial visit which took place two months after we arrived, there are now hundreds or thousands employed there. Most of the oil company people came in for so many weeks and went out for so many weeks, which accounted for the fact that there were very few permanent residents. And there were no proper restaurants when we got there - people didn't eat out. And there were certainly none with a menu. One opened with a menu and it was such an amazing day! This didn't mean to say that there was anything on the menu to eat – there was lots of vodka and a certain amount of beer, but everything else was sticky and fizzy and not very nice. There was plenty of caviar, but you couldn't find a banana. Bananas would come in and you could follow the banana skins along the street. On Saturdays Tom would go looking for bananas. We had to go foraging for food to begin with. We would go to the market and there would be a little pile of tomatoes if it was summer, lettuce for three weeks in March, a few radishes, and eggs so small they would fall through the egg hole in the refrigerator. Food was very, very difficult at the beginning so we joined with the Americans and got it imported. We got somebody to do the shopping and put it in the plane to Baku - just ordinary food. Otherwise it was extremely difficult – we depended to some extent on people coming out. Then gradually the Turkish

supermarkets opened up. The Turks had moved into that part of the world in quite a big way before the Soviet Union broke up because they thought that Turkey would become very influential in the area. But they were not received with open arms, although initially they got quite a lot of help. Further east they just went in to make money and I don't think they realised that they weren't going to be wealthy. A lot of enterprises started and failed, but they did bring food into Azerbaijan which was really good for us! Their supermarkets opened up and anything you could get in Turkey you could get in Baku, and it made life possible and a bit more tolerable. Champagne was very cheap but it was not very nice, so Turkish wine was very welcome. And rapidly some people acquired enough money to buy these things. At a local level there were the very rich and the very poor but not much in-between. People were very well educated – too well educated for the jobs that were to be done. Doctors didn't get paid very much. We had a paediatrician as a driver for a while and people were over-qualified but with no jobs. They were all educated in Moscow, because that is where you went in the Soviet period, and afterwards the Russians didn't want them and they went home and there wasn't a lot to do at home.

MM: A tragedy really ...

EY: Yes, a tragedy. The women survived, a lot of them, particularly the independent-minded women, because they would get jobs in embassies and missions, translating jobs, and do very well. But although it is a secular society, women when they got married were expected to stay at home, so quite a lot of these women have not got married. I can think of one woman in particular who used to work in the Embassy, who was really very good. She has now left the Embassy but I am sure that the reason that she hasn't got married is because she isn't prepared to stay at home. She had a job and had something to offer and wanted a career, but she wouldn't have been able to do it. So for them, independence was a godsend, but now it is a bit more difficult because it is as repressive now as it probably was then.

MM: Did you find dealing with the President rewarding? Would they agree with your requests on the whole?

EY: If you wanted to find out whether the company that you wanted to support was going to get an oil licence, they would say yes - but that didn't mean that they were going to get it. On an ordinary level, it was interesting and useful, but you wouldn't trust them

and they wouldn't trust you. But you could understand quite a lot of what was going on and all you could do was push your commercial interests and try to understand what was going on politically. It wasn't worth talking to the President if you wanted to know what was going on politically, so you would talk to various people who were in opposition at that time and you could talk to them. It got more difficult later on, for them and for everybody else. But you could maintain your conversations with the independent journalists for example and report back like anywhere else. So it was possibly slightly easier than in the Soviet period but it certainly was not easy.

MM: Not a pushover then?

EY: No, not a pushover. And I think that if you talk to Roger Thomas he will agree that you get very disillusioned. It was still a very Soviet way of thinking – their way of running government was a very Soviet style, particularly as Heydar Aliyev was a Politburo member. His son-in-law was supposed to have been a bodyguard and then became an Ambassador in London.

MM: So what did they make of him in London?

EY: He was quite a nice man – he was there for a long time, but he then got divorced from the President's daughter and he wasn't of any use any more. Then the President's son was elected after his father died and he is President now. It was said that he wasn't interested in having the power but he has obviously got a bit more of a taste for it now. He has a wife who I believe had some political ambitions but I think they have been pushed aside. When we were there they were spending a lot of money – buying clothes from Paris and things like that, which only a few other people could afford. Their children were educated in London and they had a house in Chester Square, so they were doing all right. So the people on the ground, the poorer people, the pensioners, are not getting what they should be getting. I still support an old couple in Baku – Tom met the grandmother when he was walking one day – she was begging. She was Russian and had married an Azeri. She was about 80 and he had got home with her one day and found that her son had lost his legs in a tram accident. He had been working in a champagne factory and he and his wife were not in a good way. All three of them lived in the flat of course and we started supporting them and when we left we carried on and I still give them some money every year. When I went back in 2005 I saw them, but they are both pensioners now (the old lady had died) and it is

very difficult to live on the pension – the value of the pension is very little because the cost of living has gone up so much, so life is really quite difficult. They live in a one-bedroom flat and just survive. Those are the sort of people who suffer under this regime. It is very sad.

MM: And after Baku?

Tom Young's appointment as British High Commissioner, Lusaka, 1998

EY: After Baku, it was Zambia.

MM: Quite a contrast then.

EY: Yes, well at last it was Africa. Tom took over from Patrick Nixon. It is more of a success story than it was. At the time it had Zimbabwe next door, overshadowing it, which looked like a great success story. It was 1998 and it hadn't really begun to go downhill. The farms were still going – it was before the great takeover of the farms. In Zambia we used to go and buy flour from Zimbabwe – when there were shortages in Zambia we could always get things in Zimbabwe. Compared to Zambia it was supposed to be paradise – we used to go to Victoria Falls and places like that. But it went downhill. Zambia is very agriculturally-rich and with copper prices so high they are doing very well now. But they weren't doing so well then.

MM: Was it still the era of Kenneth Kaunda?

EY: No, Kaunda has been voted out, and he went as well, unlike many others. He didn't expect to be voted out but he was. We went at the beginning of the era of Frederick Chiluba, an ex-trade union man. I think there were high hopes for Chiluba but they were not borne out as he became as corrupt as everybody else. It began to be clear that there was corruption. And copper wasn't doing too well either. But agriculturally it was starting to do quite well. Of course there are a lot of white Zambians, farmers mostly, who have been there for a long time, descendents of missionaries and copper miners. The tourism industry has come along a lot as well and to some extent as Zimbabwe has gone down Zambia has gone up. There are quite a few Zimbabwean and South African farmers in Zambia because there is unlimited water and unlimited land and nobody is going to take the land away from them. It is doing quite well agriculturally. They grow a lot of vegetables and roses and things.

And it will be quite interesting politically to see how things will go. Chiluba has gone and his successor, who we knew quite well, had been a semi-opponent of his and had a car accident, so had been somewhat damaged. But Chiluba chose him as his successor, I think because he thought that he could manipulate him. It didn't work out quite as planned, although they still haven't brought any of these people to court on corruption charges. They were trying very hard to get an anti-corruption law, but I imagine that was too difficult. I think that they have managed to trace some of Chiluba's ill-gotten gains back to banks in lots of countries – in Brussels – different sorts of banks. I think there was a case in the UK that worked but of course that didn't help anybody in Zambia and they failed to pin it on him. But things have improved for people like Kenneth Kaunda, who wasn't treated very well. He is still going strong – I went to see him in 2008 when I went back. He has done a lot for sufferers of HIV and AIDS because he had a son who died from AIDS. He began a foundation and is still working for it. He doesn't overtly support the likes of Mugabe but of course nobody will condemn Mugabe. Although I don't believe that Kaunda was particularly corrupt himself, he had a lot of people around him who weren't very nice. He has become quite benign in his old age.

MM: It is good to know that he has survived after all. What sort of age is he?

EY: He is the same sort of age as Mugabe so he must be in his eighties now. But he is a lifelong teetotaler and vegetarian and is in quite good order. He wrote to Tony Blair when we were about to leave saying 'Please don't take the High Commissioner away'.

MM: That was a nice gesture.

EY: Yes, absolutely. It is nice that people do things like that. Tom and he did a lot of work together campaigning for AIDS education in the workplace and they shared a platform many times. Many of the people who were dying were managers. It wasn't necessarily only the workers. We had scholars who came back to Zambia having done very well in training overseas who promptly died of AIDS. It is such a waste – you train managers and teachers and they are just as likely to die from the disease as anybody else.

MM: Oh dear, where do they get it from?

EY: Well, they have some practices – if somebody dies of AIDS the brother of the person is supposed to marry the widow. But if the man has AIDS, chances are the wife has got AIDS and the next one gets it – it passes around that way. It is as much from heterosexual sex as anything and trying to educate people is the important thing. There are lots of Witch Doctor practices – rather like the Mbeki thing – sleep with a virgin and you won't get AIDS – but the point is that if you have AIDS, you are passing it on - we saw a lot of that. Our own gardener at the residence had three children of his own and his brother died so he then looked after his four. You can't bring up seven children on a gardener's wage. But they all look after each other – a lot of them are being looked after by grandparents because there are no parents. Or there are twelve year olds looking after younger siblings with no parents or grandparents. So the problem will not go away, although the drug supply now is much better. People in this country survive quite well with AIDS for a long time – there is no reason why they can't in Africa as well. But this doesn't mean that the problem will go away.

MM: I think that probably concludes Africa

EY: Yes, we retired in 2002.

Elizabeth Young's post retirement activities

MM: And what are your activities now?

EY: I approached the Pimpernel Trust when I first came back to London to see if I could help them. When I went to volunteer Lady Goodenough asked if I would like to do the job one day a week. (Later she decided that she would only like to do one day a week instead of two.) I was in London and said yes, of course. Tom went away to Bosnia and around that time the lady decided that she would like to give up altogether and asked if I would like to do it for two days a week, which I said yes to. When Tom died it seemed that the only thing to do was for me to carry on, because work was what I needed, so I still work two days a week.

MM: And you mentioned that you have been on an electoral mission?

EY: Yes, I went to observe the elections in Azerbaijan in 2005 and I enjoyed it, but it has been difficult to do missions since because the ones that I have wanted either I

haven't got on or they didn't want short-term observers, or I wasn't able to go because of my other commitments. I would like to do more and I might try again – it is an interesting thing to do.

MM: It must require quite a lot of knowledge about the country itself.

EY: Well, not necessarily. If you have got some knowledge of the country it's good – there were some elections again in November last year but I couldn't think about going when it was so cold -- the problem is that in the Former Soviet Union they tend to have elections in sort of November or January and it is totally the wrong time! There are elections coming up in Zambia and while we were in Zambia we did monitor some elections, so I would be quite interested in doing that, but you need a bit more time.

MM: Well, the very best of luck with that.

EY: Thank you.

MM: I think that has covered everything.

EY: Yes, I think we have covered it very well.

MM: Thank you

Transcribed by Liz Essex.