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BIRCH, John (born 24 May 1935, died 6 May 2020)

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Interview of Sir John Birch by Virginia Crowe

Joining the Foreign Service

VC John very nice to be talking to you today. Tell me why did you join the Foreign Service?

JB Well, I suppose like many others I was at Cambridge and thinking about what I was going to do in the late 1950s at a time when all graduates got jobs pretty easily and I was very interested in foreign and international affairs. I'd been active in Cambridge clubs and societies like the United Nations Association, the Union, the party political clubs and I followed very closely the international scene. So amongst other things, I thought the Foreign Office sounded very interesting, a good career and I applied and was accepted, and I thought then: "I'll try this for a bit and if I don't like it I'll go and do something else". But I got hooked on it.

VC Your career, if you look back at it from where you are now as a retired man, it's had a great theme of Eastern Europe in it. I don't suppose it looked like that at the beginning?

JB No it didn't at all really, although I had been interested in the Communist world, and Marxism-Leninism because I read politics and economics, but my career was really one of chance in the hands of people in Personnel Department and accident. It was before the days of career planning. I always went where I was told. I never sort of checked it. I was always grateful to have another job and I enjoyed every one I ever had. From my middle career onwards I did spend more time on East European and Communist affairs and on the UN arms control. I think those were really the two areas, if I specialised, that were my particular areas.

Paris 1960-62

VC Your first posting was Paris which must have seemed like a great plum. It's a wonderful first posting isn't it?

BC Well yes it was. Everyone said how lucky I was to go there. In fact I'd spent the summer before I joined the Office in France learning French, because in those days everyone was expected, as a sort of qualification, to speak French. There was very little arrangement made

for teaching languages like French. So I was delighted to go there. I'd just got married, but Paris was a very big and rather intimidating Embassy. The Ambassador was Sir Gladwyn Jebb - later Lord Gladwyn - and although I was there for several months, I was the most junior Third Secretary, and I never actually met him. I think he was making his retirement arrangements. But his successor Sir Pierson Dixon was a figure I did meet from time to time, but he wasn't someone who walked around the Embassy and knew all his staff by any means. And the senior people in the Embassy seemed terribly grand at the time. I suppose many of the ones I worked with were in their thirties, First Secretaries, but some of them put on airs, I have to say, and regarded themselves as great experts on the French scene. My job was mostly looking at the French Left, particularly the French Communist Party and the Communist trade unions, because at that time the Communists were getting about 20% at the polls in France. Although De Gaulle was then in power, French society was enormously troubled by the war in Algeria which the Communists were opposed to, and Euro-communism was seen as a very serious threat in the late 50s and early 60s. So there was a considerable reporting requirement from London that we covered it. As this was an unpopular task it tended to get done by the most junior member of the Embassy.

VC As a junior member of the Embassy and going up through the Service, what kind of training did you get, John - it was on the job, was it?

JB It was absolutely on the job. There was a sort of introduction to the Office, but I remember the arrangements for going to Paris were more or less that I was told to make my own way there. There was an hotel that the Embassy recommended and I was to report to the Head of Chancery - later Sir Michael Hadow, a very distinguished diplomat - on Monday morning. Which was what I did, and so we bought a car and drove over there, and I turned up at the Embassy on Monday morning. I think he was very welcoming. He said: "Good to see you, Birch". Almost everyone in the Embassy was called by their surname - seniors called juniors by their surnames, and that was how I started. There was someone who guided one in the work that was to be done. There was very little training. I'm not even sure there was a Training Department.

VC It really was just learning on the job from your peers?

JB Absolutely. I remember someone told me that the way to write draft letters and telegrams was to fold the paper down the middle and leave big gaps between the paragraphs. And I quickly learned why. It was to leave plenty of space for someone, just a bit senior to you, to completely redraft everything you'd written.

VC Well it was effective obviously in the long run?

JB I think it's probably better now that people are given much more formal training than they were then. But I remember later when I was Head of a Department, and new entrants would come along, I wondered whether the training had really been of any value at all. It would have been much better if we had shown them the ropes from day one.

VC But that would have taken time?

JB Well it would, yes.

VC You left Paris in ...?

The Cuban Missile Crisis

JB At the end of '62. I left just after the Cuban missile crisis. Although we weren't particularly touched by that in Paris, I had arrived just after the U2 crisis, in 1960, when the Four Power Summit in Paris that had broken up in disarray because the Russians had shot down the U2 spy 'plane had packed up and gone home. And I remember thinking then, what an enormous setback that was. This had been a summit where we'd hoped we'd get on better terms with the Russians, and then as I left Paris there was the Cuban crisis. One of the things that is difficult to remember now, is how the nuclear threat dominated, I suppose, all of my time in the Foreign Service, right up until the mid 1980s or the late '80s, when arms control really began to have some effect, and Gorbachev took over in the Soviet Union. We think now about weapons of mass destruction and terrorism all of the other things, the environment, global warming, that threaten us. But for those of us who worked through those years, there was the real threat of annihilation with us the whole time if we miscalculated in the relationship with the Soviet Union. If people came to the top in power in Russia, people like Brezhnev in his later years, or Andropov, Chernenko who were very, in a way ineffective, geriatric old men who were unduly influenced by Party people - the KGB, the generals, the

Politburo - who had a totally blinkered view of Western life and Western intentions. And now as the archives are opened, one does realise that we came pretty close to a catastrophe on a number of occasions in the '60s, '70s and even the '80s.

VC Is it a perspective we often forget?

JB I think it is. We are warned of the enormous dangers now of international terrorism, of terrorists getting hold of nuclear or biological weapons, well certainly it's frightening. We have to do something about it. But compared with the past danger of two super powers being at war, it is really quite trivial. I think that there are many dangers that we face now in the fight against terrorism and the spread of these weapons. That we actually compromise our own principles of liberty and freedom by restricting the activities of our citizens in fighting an enemy that really isn't such a big threat as some of the ones we've had in the past.

Singapore 1963-64

VC So after Paris they sent you to Singapore, but only for a year?

JB Yes, I don't quite know why I went. Certainly it was a mistake, I think. But I enjoyed it very much and I worked for the United Kingdom Commissioner General which was a mixture of Colonial Office/Commonwealth Relations Office staff and Foreign Office, responsible for managing Singapore's foreign and defence affairs in the period up to the full independence of Singapore. And most of the job was really trying to keep control of Lee Kuan Yew, who was a very talented, but difficult Prime Minister who really wanted to run his own foreign and security policy. My boss then was Philip Moore, who later became the Queen's Private Secretary, who was from the Ministry of Defence. He had on top of him Lord Selkirk, who was the Commissioner General for South East Asia. It was a very strange structure at that time, and it was all aimed really at the gradual reduction of our military presence east of Suez.

VC Rather a tall order to keep Lee Kuan Yew under control as you put it. How was that done?

JB Singapore was to become independent through a merger with Malaya and Lee Kuan Yew was a much more adept negotiator than the Malayans. We were really holding the ring on

this, and so we could say no to a number of his demands about power sharing, about the compensation and grants in aid, and the future of the naval base and the military base. So we had a number of cards in our hands which we were able to use, I think, reasonably effectively in keeping him under some sort of control. But he knew that we wanted this merger solution, and so on the whole I think he got his way. Perhaps the most blatant example of his blackmail was over the opposition. One of the things he was quite determined was that his political opponent - a party called the Barisan Sosialis - would not after independence be able to trouble him. His final ultimatum was that the British, who were in charge of internal security, should lock up all his political opponents. I was not involved in that decision, but it had big repercussions. We locked up all of the main opposition leaders and a lot of their supporters, and I'm afraid they stayed in prison without trial for many years thereafter. So that he was able to run Singapore as almost a one-party state in those early years.

VC And then after Singapore?

Romania under Ceausescu 1965-68

JB After Singapore I came back to London for a while and then I began what was to be quite a long adventure in the East European and Communist world with a posting to Romania. I learnt Romanian before I went and it was a really quite fascinating time. Ceausescu had just come to power in 1965 and was showing a lot of independence from the Russians and from the Comecon and Warsaw Pact. This was something which we found really attractive, and thought that we could make something of it.

VC The French were quite active in Romania at that time, weren't they? There was a visit by Couve de Murville and they were building a factory there?

JB Exactly, the French were. But traditionally Romania had been within the French sphere of influence. People called Bucharest the Paris of the East, and of course the language is a Romance language. But we had, I think, a real dilemma over our policy and we were probably in many ways, looking back, mistaken. Ceausescu came after one of the worst of the Romanian dictators, Georghiu-Dej. Ceausescu was a nationalist who made a lot of appealing noises to the West. As you mention, he wanted to trade independently with the West, to reduce his dependence on the other Communist states. He was famous for saying: "Why should we raise pigs for the Poles to put into tins. We can put Romanian pigs into

Romanian cans". And so he started borrowing foreign money, buying factories from the West and importing a lot of know-how. And we of course wanted to be in on that. British business wanted to be in on that. And so there was a constant stream of British business people coming. It was felt that our business prospects would be better if we were close politically to the Romanians, and Ceausescu did a number of things that appealed to us. He rehabilitated a fair number of Romanians who had been political dissidents within the Communist Party in the earlier years. People like Miron Constantinescu, and Lucien Patrascanu. And this suggested to us that here was a Communist leader that was liberal in his instincts and who was going to create great trouble for cohesion within the Soviet Bloc. There was even talk of the possibility that he might be interested in the non-aligned movement. I think it was farfetched. But certainly Ceausescu invited to Bucharest an enormous number of world leaders who were anti-Communist. He built up an international reputation that was in a way not dissimilar to Yugoslavia, as someone who could be active and helpful. There was even a Romanian plan for bringing a peace settlement in Vietnam.

On reflection it was cloud cuckoo land. But they managed to get themselves on the stage in an attractive way and we, I wouldn't say turned a blind eye, but didn't look deeply enough at the real nature of Ceausescu's political agenda. I think also that he changed in nature over the time. Clearly he was a disturbed figure psychologically but he became sort of manic in his later years. But early on he was someone who Western leaders came and talked with quite reasonably. In fact de Gaulle came to Romania in the summer of 1968, just before he fell from power in the great riots and upheavals throughout Europe in 1968. And almost everyone from the Shah of Persia to Richard Nixon beat a path to his door. I'm glad to say that senior British people didn't because I think we were able to dissuade them. The view from the Embassy, which was quite a limited one, was that there was a very serious downside to the regime which was pretty brutal and oppressive. Perhaps I can give you an anecdote. My Ambassador was Sir Leslie Glass, who was a splendid figure who had been in the Indian Civil Service and run the Burma oilfields. His wife Betty Glass had some minor medical complaint and a Romanian doctor was recommended - woman doctor who seemed very nice and they asked her if she would like to come and have tea with them. And so a while afterward she went round and had tea at the Residence. The next day she returned in a terrible state to say that having been to see them, she'd been visited by the Securitate who had told her that she must now collaborate with them and give them every detail of Lady Glass, become her friend and ingratiate herself into the Glass family and report to the Securitate.

Well this was a fairly normal - no surprise in that. Leslie Glass decided, however, that he would take a robust line because he was horrified that his act of kindness had led to someone, a totally unassuming middle-aged woman doctor, getting involved in this kind of thing. So he went round to the Foreign Ministry and complained to the Deputy Foreign Minister, Paul Macovescu, who was a very westernised fellow. Macovescu was clearly taken aback that an Ambassador had come and made this complaint, and said that it must be "a provocation." None of us could figure out what he meant by a provocation, but it's just one of those Communist words that people say when they don't know what else to say. So he said he'd look into it, that it would be stopped and that the people would be called off. We thought it was all right. But about a year later we learnt that this poor doctor had been punished for telling the Ambassador what had happened to her. She lost her job in the clinic where she worked. So these were the small things, there were many other examples, because we in the Embassy were given a fairly hard time by the Securitate, which really revealed to us the true nature of the regime. So however much Ceausescu would say that he wanted friendship with the West, with all his peace loving tanks paraded on 23 August, we knew really it was a very rotten, harsh, nasty regime.

VC And your own life. Was it very constrained? Very difficult?

JB We loved our time in Romania, because I really liked Romania and Romanians. I disliked the regime and the atmosphere that they created, but we lived in quite an isolated, almost a sort of siege mentality community amongst quite a small diplomatic and foreign group, and we made friends then that we still number amongst our best friends, nearly forty years later. But although we were restricted there were many compensations. We were privileged. There was very good music, ballet. There was good art. Fine opera. We could travel pretty freely anywhere. We were tracked around all the time by the Securitate but not really too oppressively. They watched what we did, but they weren't a foot behind us all the time. There were many happy things about our family. We had our children with us. My daughter was born in Bucharest and we had a very good spirit in the Embassy. A lot depends really on having an Ambassador that everyone likes and is appreciative, really wants to be there as well. Leslie Glass's attitude was: "Well, I've good people who are all very capable - you do the work and I'll orchestrate it a bit and I'm not going to interfere in what you're doing". He believed in having an Embassy that was happy and that he was involved in. He used to come to everything. His successor, who I was only there with for a short time, Sir

John Chadwick, was a bit more reserved, but that was his attitude as well. And we weren't troubled terribly by London. This was in the days when we all took our turn at encyphering telegrams. After a while we got a very primitive machine cypher called Noreen, but until then telegrams were done with a one-time pad and a cypher book, and it was an extremely laborious thing. And so everyone took turns - we had two people in Registry who did most of it, but when there was a bit of pressure the rest of Chancery - or the younger ones did it. And that made you enormously disciplined, or the Ambassador immensely disciplined, about the length of his telegrams.

Afghanistan 1973-76

VC A happy atmosphere in the Embassy. Was that the case in Kabul where you next went?

JB Kabul was rather different because I had been back in London for three years in South Asian Department when Sir Ian Sutherland was Head of the Department, and I learned a great deal from him. He was a very demanding taskmaster, and during that period from '70-'73 there was the Indo-Pakistan War and the creation of Bangladesh. It was an extremely busy and exhausting time, and we used to work in the office regularly on Saturdays and you were regarded as a bit of shirker if you weren't there on Saturday morning. I had a young family and I found that quite hard, but Kabul at the time when I needed to go off and be Head of Chancery somewhere, or do a sort of management job. Kabul was coming up and it was within the South Asian Department. I think I had a bit of a choice as to whether to go to Delhi or to Kabul. Everyone said to me - you want to go there. It's terrific. You'll have a lovely time. Children will be with you. You're the Number Two and there are great opportunities for travel and sport and it's a beautiful compound. Conditions are very nice. So I said fine. I didn't really have to say fine. I was told I was going there actually and so in 1973 I turned up in Kabul. Again I seemed to remember that I went off and bought my own aeroplane ticket, arranged for my own baggage to be sent and that kind of thing.

Coup against the King

At the time the Foreign Office really didn't want to hear anything about what was going on in Afghanistan. No news was good news, and the King had been on the throne for thirty years. There was a sort of unwritten agreement that the north of the country was an area in which the Russians had the predominant economic influence, and the south was where the Americans principally, but also the Germans, the French and the British had their aid

programmes and activities. The King was not a reformer but at least understood the tribal leaders and the balance and there was no great threat. So I think that in 1973, although we realised that it was a very backward country, there was no thought that it would disintegrate in civil war, or great change was on the way. But there were nevertheless great jealousies within the ruling Mohamedsi tribe - the ruling tribe of Afghanistan. One of King Zahir Shah's cousins, Prince Daud, seized power in a coup in July 1973, about three weeks after I arrived, and that changed the scene very considerably. The coup was not particularly bloody. I remember we heard there was a lot of shooting in the night and my wife woke me up and said: "Look, what's going on? Do you hear all that noise?" I said "Never mind, it's just a military exercise, I'm sure". But next morning the telephone lines were down and there was military music on the radio. All the signs of a coup. And sure enough there'd been a big fight and Daud had taken power. The King was in Italy having a treatment for his eyes and Daud put into power another group from within the Mohamedsi tribe which was more left wing, aimed at better relations with the Russians. He'd been Prime Minister before, and so we knew pretty much what would happen. The coup happened in fact just as our two eldest sons who were then, I think, aged eleven and nine, were actually in the air on their way out for their first summer holiday in Afghanistan and there were no flights of course. The 'plane landed in Tehran and someone from the Embassy gathered them up. We had no communications, but we did through the diplomatic wireless service get a message from them that they were going to wait in Tehran with some of our friends till there was a 'plane. They were there, I think, for about ten days. We had no communications at all really. It was quite worrying. Then we learned that there was to be a 'plane. The first 'plane was going to be allowed into - a non-military 'plane - allowed into Kabul, and the Embassy was quite a way from the airport. But there was very little traffic and so - Kabul is surround by hills and when an aeroplane was coming, you would hear it coming, so you could get in your car and go to the airport. But we were very anxious, so we went ahead of time and we waited and waited, and no aeroplane and no aeroplane, and then we heard that the 'plane had been highjacked. This was the rumour. So there were some very anxious moments, an hour or so. It hadn't in fact been highjacked, but it had been diverted by Afghan fighters and forced to land in Kandahar, where they had taken everyone off the 'plane at gunpoint and searched it for explosives, or troops, or whatever. The new regime were worried that the 'plane was going to land full of commandos, I think, who were going to try to seize the airport. So these two little boys amongst others had to stand under the wing of the aeroplane at Kandahar airport

for a couple of hours while all this went on, and we didn't know what was happening. And finally they arrived and all was well. It was quite an adventure.

VC Did they regard it as an adventure?

JB They regarded it as an adventure. Yes it was a good story to tell when they went back to school. The other passengers were very kind and helpful to them. It was one of the sort of examples of what life was like in the Diplomatic Service in those days when you didn't have communications. We didn't have a telephone out. You could telephone India or Pakistan, but you couldn't telephone London. We had telex, but often that depended on the landline as well. So often that was down. So we really depended on the Diplomatic Wireless Service transmitter and Morse for our communications.

VC I suppose it meant that you were quite independent from London again?

JB Yes indeed. My Ambassador there was John Drinkall who was a rather old-fashioned, I would say, kind of diplomat and a brilliant games player, who enjoyed the opportunities for sport in Afghanistan, but was also very serious. And one of the things he was desperate to do was to get visitors from London to come and see Afghanistan and try and put it more on the map in the thinking in London. But it was very hard. It was a difficult place to get to and visitors who did come usually had to come for a week and they had a splendid time, but they felt that there were more important places.

VC I wonder....

Political Reporting

JB Perhaps I'll just come back to Afghanistan and just mention that the Daud coup was the beginning of a series of upheavals in Afghanistan over the following years, ending up in the Communist takeover. I think we were aware that there was basic instability in the country, tribal feuding; that the Government really weren't in control. They weren't tackling the social and economic problems that were so evident. But our view was that the change would be towards a military takeover, and we were really just unaware of the number of Parchan Party members who were in the Soviet Union who had fled from the King, fled from Daud, who were being helped and trained by the Russians eventually to try and take over the

country. And so although we knew things were not going well, we saw the likelihood of change as coming from within the country rather than from externally. I think that that is one of the problems of - well still happens in the Diplomatic Service - that despite the better communications of being able to see what's happening in an outside country. We were very confined to talking with the Afghan middle-class, the educated group, within the country, and we didn't know enough about what was being felt. Exactly the same as what was happening in Iran next door. We weren't aware enough of what the feeling was amongst the people who didn't meet or talk with westerners or what was happening externally.

VC Do you think we've got round that now?

JB I think we're better at it because there have been so many examples where external factors have been the cause of change within a country, and I think we communicate with one another better. And I think actually that Iran taught us a great lesson about the importance of having political feelers throughout a country and throughout neighbouring countries. In Iran, which of course has been well discussed and researched and reported on, the problem was that we regarded the Shah as the bastion of the West and our defence. We believed that he was in control, as in some ways he was, in very tight control, and we were desperate in Iran to sell, to do trade, to do business with them - particularly arms. And so we had, I won't say we had a blind eye, but we had an uncritical eye towards the Shah's regime and we were unwilling to do anything like being involved with the Opposition which would have upset him. This also goes back to and forward to the time when I was dealing with Romania again, this dilemma that we had. And I think when we come to my time as head of East European Department, we perhaps found a way round it. The business community wants the Foreign Office and the British Government to be on the side of the regime. They don't mind whether it's democratic or what it is, but they don't want to find their business interests are being compromised, or they are being penalised, because the Foreign Secretary has been on a visit and is talking about human rights, or instructing his political officers in the Embassy to find out what's going on in the bazaar.

VC It's a dilemma, isn't it? I wondered whether the intelligence services actually found a way round this instead of diplomats?

JB I hope there are But in my time in Afghanistan we didn't have any MI6 representative or any intelligence coverage at all. The Americans had a large CIA presence, but from what I read later it doesn't seem that they were any better informed about what was going on amongst the Afghan Communist Party in exile in Russia, and I don't think they had particularly good connections either amongst the people outside the ruling class. I think that they also had their eye on the same sort of group, a military group - a military coup was more likely than anything else. And of course in Iran we accepted or believed that SAVAC - the Shah's Intelligence Service - had men on every street corner and knew everything that was going on. We had a very good liaison with them, and so the scope for independent intelligence activity was very limited and probably wasn't seen as being necessary.

The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and negotiating with the Russians 1977-80

VC So you moved on from Kabul to Geneva. You had been dealing in your other posts with the Soviet Union rather tangentially and when you went to Geneva to deal with the Test Ban Treaty. Presumably you were negotiating with the Soviet Union?

JB Well I went from Kabul to the Royal College of Defence Studies. This was a sabbatical year and then I went to the Test Ban negotiations. This was a completely new departure for me and to begin with I found it quite difficult because the Test Ban Treaty negotiations had started some months before I got there, and it was dominated by people who were steeped in arms control negotiations. I think that the real reason for me going was that they wanted someone who had a rather broader view of international affairs. I was the Political Adviser to the Delegation. I was also the UK negotiator in one of the Groups that was negotiating the text of the Treaty. The team on the American side were very heavily from the arms control and disarmament agency, from the weapons laboratories in the States and the seismologists and large CIA element. The Russians mirrored that as well in their team, with a lot of experts, but also a very heavy KGB element. On our side the Head of our Delegation was Sir Percy Cradock. The hope was that we would be able to resume the partial Test Ban Treaty talks and turn them into a Comprehensive Test Ban, thereby banning all nuclear weapon test explosions. It was a policy espoused by President Carter, linked to the SALT talks, supported by Jim Callaghan. The Russians had agreed to start this negotiation because they were worried that American nuclear technology was outstripping theirs. They were prepared to have a ban because by freezing the present situation they would be better off than if testing

continued and the Americans got ahead of them. They also for presentational reasons wanted to show that they were peace loving. So that was the sort of atmosphere around the table. I think that for me the difficult thing was that I believed in the test ban. I thought that it was the right thing to do. I'd been actually quite active in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as an undergraduate. I'd been a unilateralist. I believed in the cause. But in the other delegations, the most senior Americans and Russians, and even I think in our Delegation, felt that to ban nuclear weapon tests was a mistake if we wanted to maintain the safety and stockpile of weapons and that if we were to make advances in developing new ones. The argument for a test ban, the most powerful argument, was that if there was a ban we would be able to gradually get other states that had not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty to give up their nuclear weapons programmes. It was very difficult to put pressure on the Israelis, the Brazilians, the Indians, the Pakistanis, the Argentinians, the South Africans, the North Koreans and others who might become nuclear weapon states, if we ourselves not only had nuclear weapons, but were testing them and developing new ones. I think that had we got a comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in 1978/79, which looked as though it might have been on the cards, it is possible that we could have restrained some of these states that now have nuclear weapons or have nuclear capabilities. On the American side Carter was I think determined, Callaghan was determined. They believed in the test ban. The Head of the American Delegation was a very brilliant American lawyer called Paul Warnke who'd been top of his class I think at Yale. A really remarkable man who was amongst the most powerful advocates I've ever come across. I remember - we all used to say in the British Delegation: "Well if we ever got in trouble we'd get Paul Warnke to get us out of it". And I remember the Number 2 in the Soviet Delegation, who became a great friend and who was later my opposite number in New York and was Ambassador in Vienna when I was Ambassador in Budapest - his name was Roland Timerbaev - he said to me "When I listen to Paul Warnke I often have to pinch myself to realise that I'm Russian and not a member of the American Delegation supporting what he has to say". But anyway, the negotiations, which I'm sure are very thoroughly documented because we used to write endless, endless detailed reports as though the world depended on it, came to an end in 1980 largely because Mrs Thatcher became Prime Minister and Ronald Reagan became President of the United States. Mrs Thatcher had been, I can only say got at, very cleverly by the American opponents of the test ban; particularly the people of the weapons laboratories who'd been to see her and talk to her and said: "There is a disaster on its way if we sign a test ban and can't test our weapons. You know you'll never have another nuclear warhead in a Trident submarine and this is

going to be the end of Anglo-American collaboration on nuclear matters” - all of that kind of thing. Reagan and his advisers just regarded a continual updating of nuclear weapons as essential for American defence. Actually I left the Test Ban negotiations because I was on my way to Hungary, but the negotiations soon came to an end. I think it was a very sad time. I’m told that at a meeting, at which I wasn’t present, very early after Mrs Thatcher came to power in 1979 she was given a briefing by the British side with the Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser of the Ministry of Defence, Victor Macklin, putting the case, which I don’t think he personally believed in for continuing with the talks and the reason for ending the testing, and trying to reduce the nuclear stockpile. Mrs Thatcher said: “Well Victor, if the French have got ‘em, I’m going to have ‘em”. And that was the end of the discussion.

VC Let’s talk a little more about the Test Ban?

JB About the Test Ban. One of the things that rarely actually comes your way, I think, in diplomacy is to work on a negotiation, which I did for three years, with pretty much the same cast of characters, all living sort of temporarily in Geneva and sitting round the same table perhaps a dozen of you all together, negotiating and talking, each with a lot of secrets on your side as to what your position is going to be, and what your next move will be, what you’re prepared to accept, without revealing any of it to the other side, who become really quite close friends. We actually were very much second fiddle to the Americans, and we supported American positions pretty well all the way through, except for one thing which I will mention in a moment. So we were regarded by the Russians as two against one. The French and Chinese wouldn’t take part. We hoped that we could shame them into observing and one day signing a ban. We came to know our American opposite numbers and colleagues extremely well and also the Russians. The rules in the Diplomatic Service were that if you had a conversation with a Russian or if you went out to a meal with a Russian diplomat you had to write a report afterwards and send it to Security Department. But we were having hundreds of these conversations and talks all the time, going out to meals with them in Geneva and seeing them - a mixture, some of them were straightforward diplomats; others were KGB. There was one particular fellow who was a KGB officer who I was later to meet in the Security Council Secretariat in New York, so I got to know him very well. He used to say: “Well if you’d like my personal opinion”, and we always knew that any member of the Russian Delegation who offered a personal opinion on the state of the negotiations or their position was a member of the KGB, or they wouldn’t be offering it. So that was another

nuance. We had military people who came from the rocket forces, and so they were a bit harder to get to know, although the American military on their team got on good terms with them. We really were a group of, I suppose a nucleus of 15 or 20 people, all on first name terms who went out together. Every now and again we'd have a great sort of reception, a get-together, when everyone, led by the Russians, got completely smashed, and were sometimes rather indiscreet. I remember we stayed in hotels to begin with because the idea was that the negotiations would all be over in six months. It was a bit like the First World War - it would all be over by Christmas. Three years later we were still grinding on, and the Russians came and we got houses and the Americans got houses, but a large part stayed in hotels because we sort of had sessions or terms. We'd get to the end of a period of negotiation, no instructions, so we'd have a break and go back to capitals. The Russians all stayed in the same hotel very close to where we were in the centre of Geneva, and I remember sometimes they would ask us if we'd like to come on a Saturday night because they were cooking a fish. The Russian Delegation had a minibus and they'd go out into the woods around Geneva on Saturday morning and look for mushrooms; a very, very Russian occupation. Then they would buy a big fish at the Migros Supermarket, and cook it in their hotel bedrooms. And this infuriated the hotel management, but it was a great honour to be invited to one of these fish suppers. It was a wonderful occasion because they had a whole series of little electric rings and a big pot that they put the fish in. We'd have the mushrooms and this fish - a pike or something like that - with masses of vodka, clouds of thick tobacco smoke and a great deal of back-slapping. I found that sort of comradeship was really one of the very attractive things about the negotiations. And Roland Timerbaev, the Number 2 in the Soviet Delegation, and a great figure in the arms control world, was I think a real believer in the value and importance of arms control and nuclear disarmament. He later became their Deputy Permanent Representative in New York and was their man on the Security Council when I had exactly the same position for three years at the UK Mission. He was the Soviet delegate to the Trusteeship Council of which I was the President, and I got to know him and his wife Nina extremely well.

VC Did it facilitate your relationship in New York, that you'd have this close partnership in the past?

JC I think it did enormously. He was probably the only member of the Soviet Test Ban Delegation who never told us a lie. He was that sort of person. But absolutely loyal to the

Soviet side. He never misled us, whereas sometimes there was deliberate misleading. I have to say we did a bit of that on our side as well. In New York he was on the Trusteeship Council. We had a very difficult time because the Russians were against us. I remember once when Roland opened the debate for the Soviet Delegation he said that we had worked together a great deal in the past and were good friends. He more or less indicated that he was sorry that we were now opponents. And this was on the record at the UN, which was a pretty brave thing for a Soviet diplomat to say in 1987. After New York, I went to Hungary and he became the Soviet Ambassador to International Organisations in Vienna. So when I went to Vienna I used to go and see him and talk to him. He was very depressed. This must have been in the early '90s, just before the Soviet Union collapsed. I remember saying to him: "Why has the system collapsed?" and he thought for a moment and said: "It was against human nature". I think that is probably the best brief explanation that I have heard anywhere. This great Marxist-Leninist experiment which I believed had a future in my early days at university and in the Foreign Office. There were many things about Marxism-Leninism that were attractive, that weren't fatally flawed, and probably would survive. The challenge for us was to live side by side with it. Not to try to defeat it. To accept it and mould it and modify, and this was just a different way, that we could coexist. Anyway, to come back to Roland Timerbaev, another interesting thing he said to me - which made me realise that the Soviet system was on the rocks - was: "Do you know that next week I haven't got any money in the Mission to pay the staff or to pay the electricity and heating bills". I said: "What are you going to do?" He said: "I don't know". I don't know what he did do, but that was the position of the Soviet Mission to the UN in Vienna then. They had no money.

VC So you left Geneva and did you go directly to Hungary?

Hungary and the Iron Curtain again 1980-83

JB I went directly to Hungary. We loved Geneva where we had served in the late '60s after I was in Romania. We just had a very good, happy family life. So when I went back there with the Test Ban, although we spent the early part living in a hotel, for nearly two years we again had a very nice house and life in the canton of Vaud. The Test Ban was periods of intensive work followed by twiddling our thumbs, which was very nice if you like tennis and golf and windsurfing and walking and bicycling and drinking smooth white wine. So we did that, and gardening. We had a lot of friends in the Geneva area from our previous posting. It was before the days of consultation when personnel ask: "Where you want to go? What do

you want to do?" I simply got a telegram saying that my next posting was Budapest and that I would have six months off to learn Hungarian and then I would be on my way. I remember - my children were then teenagers or a bit below it - saying to them: "It's very exciting. We're leaving here and we're going to Hungary." And there was incredible moaning and groaning around the table "Why have we got to leave here? We've only just come, we've all got mopeds and friends...". I think this is really the hardest thing that people suffer in the Diplomatic Service, - everyone says: "How wonderful. You get help with school fees and stuff like that". But actually I would always rather have had the children with us. When they come out it's difficult to get going and then within two years, just as they've started making friends and get to know the place, you're whipped off somewhere else and you have to start all over again. Anyway, I went to the School of Slavonic and East European Studies and my wife and I learned Hungarian. She better than me - we slaved away at it, and I arrived in Budapest in the middle of 1980. Those were still quite dark days in Hungary. Nevertheless, it was known as one of the better, more liberal, if you can use a word like that, of the Warsaw Pact countries. They had a wily old leader, Janos Kadar, who was able, everyone said, to handle the Russians. The Russian policy was - "provided you Hungarians remain loyal to us in foreign affairs and support us, don't cause trouble like Ceausescu, and run a tidy ship, you can have some freedom at home. Internal matters are up to you as long as you're loyal." I think generally speaking, that was a true reflection of the relationship. Hungary was known as "Kadar's happy barracks"; provided you lived by the rules you had quite a good time inside. It was still a pretty oppressive, drab sort of regime but I have to admit that we enjoyed it. We were quite limited in our contacts with Hungarians. Not as much as we had been in Romania fifteen years previously - we had quite good Hungarian friends. There were a fair number of people who were ready to be mildly critical of the regime. There was a professional class in Budapest. Even in the Communist days it had a good European feel to the city and the facilities were jolly good. I like the outdoor life - shooting, tennis and rowing and that kind of thing and there were terrific opportunities for that.

I think at that time politically we were probably behind the game in political understanding. We still believed in the cohesiveness of the Warsaw Pact and that the Soviet Union would act with armed force if it looked as though any of the countries were causing too much trouble and were likely to break away. We were very influenced by what had happened in East Germany in '53, in Budapest in '56, Prague in '68. My Ambassador for nearly all of the time was Sir Bryan Cartledge who was an extremely shrewd observer of the Communist scene,

with a very, very good understanding of the Russians and their power structures, and also of society as well. And I don't think that he would disagree with that assessment. In fact he's writing a book about Hungary which is going to be published shortly. I have seen the chapters on what was happening during the years that we were there. He has had the benefit of reading now the original documents and to talking to many people. I think we had a fairly good feel, but there was a great mass of stuff going on that we were not aware of in Hungary. Of cross currents. We overestimated the extent to which the Russians were pulling the strings, of the influence they had. We didn't see the beginnings, or enough of the beginnings, of the revolt against Kadar and new, good people coming to the top. I think that this was not just in Hungary, but knowing what was going on elsewhere in Eastern Europe. By then, most of the immediate post-War communist generation, real believers in the system, had died or gone. And their successors were people who saw the system as something which gave them power and authority, but they weren't real believers in justice for the working class. So we were looking at a socialist system which was really just a power structure that had lost a great deal of its ideological base.

VC It was already hollow.

JB It was bankrupt in lots of ways. It was becoming bankrupt economically. It couldn't compete with the gains of the early years. It was bankrupt intellectually as well. I think probably that we weren't quick enough, we didn't really understand that. We had all been brought up to believe that the Communists never let go of power willingly and that East Germany was the key to Soviet security - the 20 million war dead and all the rest of it - so that maintaining the reunification of Germany and maintaining an absolutely loyal East German military-backed regime was vital to Soviet interests. And that was the thinking - our interpretation of Soviet policy in the early 1980s and throughout the whole of the SS20 and Cruise Missile Crisis. And I think that was a reasonable view. It was the view the Russians took as well. It was only under Gorbachev that the signals began to become apparent that they didn't see Eastern Europe as vital to the survival of the Soviet Union.

Dissidents and Journalists

VC Can I explore the point about having one's finger on the subliminal pulse, as it were? It's the same point.....in Afghanistan. Remember the CPRS.....always said that

journalists could do a better job, or as good a job as diplomats. I wonder what you think about that?

JB I think that there is a good deal of truth in that. The advantage that diplomats have is that they are constant, they're there, they have a bigger coverage, and they are better able to pull ideas and reach assessments and draw on information from - perhaps not as exciting or dramatic - but from many sources and from other countries. It's a more comprehensive and computerised view, if it works properly, which brings together intelligence and conversations and embassy reporting to give a balanced view. But some would say: "Well, you would say that, wouldn't you, because you're a diplomat?" In my experience though, and particularly in Eastern Europe, there were occasions when journalists gave us quite sort of unique and brilliant insights into things that were happening that we didn't know about at all. Perhaps I'll give you a couple of examples of where I think journalists helped me personally. Neil Ascherson was the correspondent of "The Observer" and a very well known figure. He used to come to Hungary to write and talk with - this was, I suppose, in '81 - the dissidents. They were a difficult group for us to meet because although we knew their names, we didn't know where they lived and we knew that having contact with the Embassy was quite likely to lead them into further trouble, although they were beginning to obtain a reputation high enough in the West that the authorities hesitated to interfere directly with them. Anyway Neil Ascherson said that he thought that I would find them interesting, and he gave the name and the address of Miklos Hazarszti, who was the editor and main distributor of one of the leading *samizdat* magazines in Hungary. He didn't have a telephone. Dissidents only got telephones so they could be tapped. The authorities decided that they were going to make him excommunicado, but I went to see him and he became over the years a very good friend. Through him and his friends I got to know a circle of dissidents and talked with them which I could never have managed to do without the introduction from a journalist. And many of the things that journalists came and told me about conversations they'd had were much more frank than Hungarians would have had with me, knowing I was from the Embassy. There's a certain barrier that takes a while to break down between a diplomat and a politician, or a member of the public or a dissident, or a member of the Opposition in those circumstances. Another journalist was Michael Charlton at the BBC who wrote a book called "The Eagle and the Small Birds" about Eastern Europe. An extremely good book, based on broadcasts, that didn't really get the recognition it deserved. I remember he went and found by detective work in Budapest, someone who had been the Mayor of Budapest in the very early days after

the takeover. Quite a big controversial figure, and he learned things that really I would never have found out by myself. Visiting journalists, and we didn't have resident press in those days, were an enormous help to us. So I think that a good embassy taps into the press. Not just reading the press articles, but talking with the journalists. One of the weaknesses now, in days when political reporting is much less in fashion is that we use journalists to put across our point of view on things, hoping that they will reflect in their articles either the Diplomatic Service or the British point view, and we don't use them adequately as a source of keeping our fingers on the pulse and learning what is going on in a country.

VC Thank you John for that slight diversion from the main theme. No, I put you in that position. You were talking about changes in Eastern Europe and in Hungary and you came to supervise that in the Foreign Office as Head of Eastern European Department. So it was a theme that continued when you came back to London, was it not?

Eastern European Department 1986-89

JB Well it is very nice that you say I came to supervise it. In a way I had a small hand. I was very fortunate because Nigel Broomfield, who had been Head of Soviet and East European Department in 1982, said that he thought that his Department ought to be divided, partly because the workload was very great, but more importantly because it was the right time to look at East Europe separately from the Soviet Union. It was wrong to lock them together. I think he was absolutely right. But it was quite unusual and generous for a Head of Department to suggest his Department should be smaller. Most people want their Department to be bigger, which I had a go at later, when I was Head of EED. And so I was made Head of this new Department, and what we really had to do was to justify our existence and show that East Europe was different, wasn't beholden in everything to the Soviet Union. I suppose really picking on other people's ideas and thoughts, we designed a strategy, which we called differentiation, which was to try to favour those countries which were ready to depart a bit from the Soviet pattern and to remain very hard-nosed towards the regimes which toed the Soviet line, simply parroted all their propaganda. And it was at a time when we were involved - if my memory is correct - in the great tussles over the introduction of the SS20 and Cruise missiles into the European theatre and the development of the neutron bomb.

New Policies

It was a very tense period. Brezhnev died in the summer of 1983. We had a period of Andropov and then Chernenko. There was a feeling that we couldn't get through to the Russians. We weren't talking so we probably ought to try and talk with the more sensible of the East European leaders. The countries that were favoured for this special differentiated treatment were the ones that we thought were more likely to be responsive and where we could make some progress were Poland, Hungary. The hard nuts were the East Germans and Romanians, Honneker and Ceausescu, who by then had revealed his true colours and were pretty much in the Western doghouse, and Zhivkov in Bulgaria. I also had the former Yugoslavia in the Department as well, but that was different and the Yugoslavs hated being included with all of the others. They said: "We're different and deserve our own Department". We started off this policy with Malcolm Rifkind who was then the Minister of State in the Foreign Office and he readily agreed that he would like to visit some of these countries and talk to their political leaders. And this was in a way quite unusual. We hadn't had many visits by Foreign Secretaries or Foreign Office Ministers. I remember when we were in Hungary before we were just desperate - I don't think we had a single visit from a Cabinet Minister apart from Lord Carrington who was Foreign Secretary in the period I was there. Rifkind went first and Geoffrey Howe, the Foreign Secretary, took a close interest in things and had a good understanding. Both made tours round most of Eastern Europe on different occasions. We faced two particular problems. One I mentioned before was that this was the time when the Foreign Office was desperately keen to show that we were pushing British business. The Foreign Secretary never went anywhere without taking a group of businessmen with him who could leap on to his bandwagon and sell, buy, trade, all the rest of it. And they didn't want a controversial programme. We, however, in planning these visits as part of our differentiated policy wanted to show that, while we were talking with the Communist leaders, we were aware that large numbers of the population would regard this as a betrayal. We did not want to give legitimacy to people like Honneker, Jaruzelski, Kadar. So we had to do something which showed that, although we talked with political leaders, the Communist party bosses, we were very well aware of the deprivations and the denials that the ordinary population and thinking classes were suffering. This led us into a lot of problems and quite a game. Perhaps if I just give you a couple of examples: Geoffrey Howe went to Poland in 1985 and saw Jaruzelski. At the same time we decided we had to do something to show that we were supportive of Solidarity and of the Catholic Church. The Polish Government in working up the programme were very reluctant to let him see Cardinal

Glomp, but he insisted. They finally gave way on that, but there was no way that Solidarity or the dissidents were going to be allowed in, so we arranged a private occasion at which the dissidents would be invited round to the Residence, and that Geoffrey Howe on arrival in Warsaw would go, without telling the Polish authorities, to the grave of Father Popieusko, the priest who had been murdered by the Polish Intelligence Service a few months previously. And of course the television cameras were there and everyone saw Geoffrey Howe going to the grave of Father Popieusko before the official programme. Then a group of dissidents, the leading people actually who later became part of the Polish Government, came round to the Residence and had a talk with Geoffrey Howe. Christopher Meyer, who was the press spokesman, briefed the press all the time. So within minutes of the meeting having taken place the BBC World Service and the Polish Service were broadcasting what was happening. The Polish authorities were completely wrongfooted about this. They were absolutely furious and said that in view of this unfriendly behaviour no Poles would attend the Foreign Secretary's reception that evening, but of course they couldn't cancel the invitations at the last minute which they had been instrumental in sending out through the Protocol Department. So they had men in leather coats standing outside the Residence turning away people as they arrived on the door. Some very brave Poles said: "Who are you? I've got an invitation so I'm going in". So some came in. We had a big dust-up afterwards. But I think that we were able to show that while we started a dialogue with the Polish authorities we were also fully understanding and appreciative of the sacrifices that the Polish people were making.

In Prague we faced a much more difficult problem, because having known what we had done in Warsaw, the Czechs were very well aware of what might happen in Prague. We decided that we couldn't do the same thing. The Czechs always rounded up the dissidents and Charter 77 people, put them in a bus and drove several hundred kilometres away from Prague on the day of the visit and chucked them out of the bus in a country lane, and said: "Right. You're on your own". There was no chance of them turning up in Prague. So we played it very straight and talked with Husak, the President and Party boss, and Cnoupek, the Foreign Minister. This another example of a journalist, an academic being very helpful to us: Timothy Garton-Ash and various others in his circle were closely involved in what was going on in Czechoslovakia, and we got some of them to come into the Foreign Office and talk with Geoffrey Howe about the purpose of the visit, the background, and all of this. He was very good at this with a sort of barrister smile about being briefed before he went off on something. Gathered people around him and we talked for an hour or more. How were we

going to make it clear to the public that we were not just doing business with the Czech Communist Party? And Timothy Garton-Ash said: “Have you thought of looking at Charter 77, the dissident document which sets out things about freedom of movement, human rights, all of this stuff – the press, and seeing whether there are bits of that that you could use in Howe's speeches.” And I said: “No, I hadn't, but I'll have a look”. So in drafting Geoffrey Howe's speech for his dinner with the Czech Foreign Minister we took bits of Charter 77's statement, unacknowledged, and put them into the text of his speech. Things like: “We believe in the observance of human rights, freedom of speech and movement” and there were all the Czechs at the dinner clapping away. Afterwards, immediately afterwards, Christopher Meyer briefed the press to say; “You will have noticed in Geoffrey Howe's speech, all of these quotations” – and they were then put in inverted commas “taken from Charter 77”. And this was broadcast by the BBC. The Czechs were absolutely livid. They thought that they had been conned, which they had. They'd seen the text of the speech in advance, as we always did. They'd actually translated the damned thing without realising what was there. At another meeting when Geoffrey Howe was having dinner with Cnoupek, the Foreign Minister, Derek Thomas who was then the Political Director in the Foreign Office and I had gone off privately to meet a group of dissidents of Charter 77, and this was publicised as well. So that it came across again, we hoped, to the Czechoslovak people that we disapproved of the regime. Although we were there to see how we could normalise European relations, in fact we were very aware of the things that they suffered and were on their side. So that's a bit of fun and games, but there was this big problem of how, in order to help ordinary people, you have to do some business with their nasty leaders. Needless to say on both of these occasions the CBI and business people all said: “Well we'd like to send a trade delegation with you, but we don't want to get mud on our shoes as a result of any meetings with dissidents, and problems like that. Can't you divide these things? We'll have one visit that's for business and do the political stuff quite separately on another occasion?” We wouldn't have it.

VC Did they get mud on their shoes?

JB No they didn't. Of course they didn't because one of the tactics of the East European trade people, was to pretend that trade went to those who were most favourable to them politically. In fact they were very hardnosed and only dealt with those people who they got the best deal from. I never detected any commercial favours coming our way because we

appeared to be on their side, or our being done down because we were taking a tough stance on something. That was just a game they played with us.

The State Department and Political Appointees

VC When you were Head of East European Department at that time, I notice that Ceausescu went to the US. I just wonder, with your experience of Romania and with the policies that we've been talking about, whether you got any comment on that and whether it reflects on US diplomatic skills or political thinking?

JB I think that that was an immense misjudgement by the Americans in the same way that Ceausescu's visit to London was a grave misjudgement on our part. In the memoirs of Ceausescu's interpreter, a Securitate officer named Ion Pacepa, there is a very good account of what the dictator and his loathsome wife really thought of Britain and the US.

VC You pointed out we both made the same mistake. But generally in your experience, what is your view of American diplomacy? They have this system of political appointees at the top level and perhaps that has an effect on their service, but not a great effect on its policy?

JB My experience is that, where there have been professional diplomats as Ambassadors, they've been absolutely first class. When I was an Ambassador myself they were excellent colleagues and we, on the whole, took very similar views. Maybe British and American policy weren't always on the same track, but our assessment and understanding, our views on what was happening, were similar indeed. One of the reasons was that because of the level of cooperation amongst the EU and NATO we talk amongst one another quite a lot. We do tend to get to a common view of things, despite the difficulties we have with the EU. In some ways that's good. In other ways that's bad. If the American Ambassador takes a very different view to you on a political situation, you begin to think well, perhaps we've got it slightly wrong, and so there tends to be a coming together. On the political appointees as Ambassadors, I think my experience has been that they've been very varied. On the whole I'm in favour of bringing people from outside into the Diplomatic Service. I know it's very bad for career structures and my former colleagues would probably kill me for saying it – but I think it brings quite a breath of fresh air, and provided there are good and sensible people

working around an outside ambassador, sometimes they do good. They may cause a lot of problems. They may affect promotion, but it can be quite stimulating. In Romania one of their biggest successes I think was when they did bring in an outside Ambassador. I can't unfortunately remember the years, but it was during Ceausescu's time. A former Peace Corps volunteer who'd been in Romania whose name was Fundabunk, I think – had been extremely critical of the Ceausescu regime and regarded American policy as toadying to the Ceausescu regime and not being tough enough. And he then went back to the US and became an academic and was quite involved in Democratic Party politics. He more or less applied for the job to be Ambassador in Romania and he got it. I think it must have been under Carter, but anyway, he went there and his first job was to sack a lot of people in the Embassy who had been really snotty to him when he'd been a Peace Corps volunteer. But he was determined that he was going to reveal what the Ceausescu regime was really like, which the US State Department knew, but they had not wanted to rub in. They'd been prepared to have diplomatic relations and not to be too openly critical because of all the things that Ceausescu could do for American political and commercial interests. He really let rip. The American Congress then were able, because they have the trade sanctions, through the most favoured nations clause, which I don't really approve of, to act against Romania. Of course it made life difficult for people who in the normal American/Romanian relations, you know, business people, academic exchanges and all of that kind of thing, which one wants to happen, because this is the way that you get blood flowing between the two countries, very difficult. It put a stop to many of those things. Non-career American Ambassadors are not a bad idea, although I wouldn't like to see it as widespread on our side.

VC Thank you for that. Going back to your time as Head of Eastern European Department, it was a time you look back on with some satisfaction because you were able to read the signals?

JB I was fortunate in that the timing was quite good. It was a period when there were these very old Communist leaders who, in a way, wanted to show that they had done something towards the West, had gained recognition. The British Foreign Secretary wasn't the only one who went on visits, but I think he was something of a pathfinder. The hosts wanted to show that they were international statesmen as well as just Communist Party bosses. But they were on their way out – age and change was going to bring them down. So that timing was quite good and there was a younger generation of people who were interested in more contact with

the West who, although they wanted to remain in control, also wanted their countries to be more acceptable. There was always this difficulty in the Communist countries. The Party wanted the country to be viable, but they also wanted to have total control. This was a conflict. To be viable you had to let people develop their own talents, have contacts with the West, to have some freedoms. But as soon as that happened, the Party began to lose control. North Korea is one extreme, and the sort of free for all which became Poland or Yugoslavia is the other. The others that tried to maintain total control – North Korea is perhaps a bad example; Albania would be better, hung on a few more years. The writing was on the wall and they went as well.

VC You went on from being Head of Eastern European Department to the UN, but since we're talking about Eastern Europe, would you like to leapfrog that and talk about your time in Hungary, or would you rather go on about the ...?

Albania: Gold and Warships

JB What I wouldn't mind doing is just having a brief word about Albania, because that was, for me anyway, it was a very interesting episode. Julian Bullard, who I think was one of the great brains and the most creative of diplomats, certainly in my time, was the Political Director in my early years in East European Department. He had thought that it would be a good idea to try to re-establish diplomatic relations with Albania, or at least to start talking to the Albanians with whom we'd broken relations, I think in 1947, over the sinking of three warships in the Corfu Channel. We'd held on to the gold that was to be given back to them at the end of the War and said: "Until you pay the compensation that has been awarded to us by the International Court of Justice, we're not going to give the gold back". Enver Hoxha had built this a very isolated pro-Chinese Communist state. But Hoxha was ill and died during the period I'm talking about. We were worried that when there was change we wouldn't have a foothold; that we wouldn't have any contact with the Albanians in a period when there was going to be change. We were also worried that if Albania decided to become pro-Soviet it would give the Russians the possibility of having a naval base in the Adriatic, a base in the Mediterranean which they hadn't got. So we sent a message through the French who had an Embassy there, that if a senior Albanian happened to be in Paris at a certain date it might coincide with a visit by a British diplomat who would be happy to have a talk with them.

That duly happened in 1985, and I was the British diplomat who was sent in secret to Paris. I had a team with me; the Legal Adviser and someone from the Department, and the three of us went to the Albanian Embassy. It was understood that we were going to talk about the establishment of diplomatic relations, payment of compensation for the warships, the return of the gold and the reclaiming of our Embassy building in Tirana. It was a very strange experience to walk into this darkened Albanian Embassy with the curtains and all the frills and stuff, and shake hands with them and sit down at the table and start talking about how we were going to tackle all of this. The added complication was that the Americans were also part of the claim. They had a claim on the gold because America property had been nationalised by the Albanians in 1947. All the Albanians in California and all over the world, if they knew that there was going to be a deal, would want compensation paid for out of the gold. So the news that the negotiations were taking place had to be kept very secret, because we didn't want to be flooded with other claims. The Albanians had made it clear through the French that they were not prepared to talk face to face with the Americans, and so we started this negotiation. I drew very considerably on my experience of Comprehensive Test Ban negotiations. You don't put your cards on the table to begin with. We started by making short statements of principle. Then we would break for coffee, and while we were having coffee and it was off the record, we would talk about a few things, and then we went back to the table. And we talked I suppose for the best part of a year. It's a good example of how, although we had learnt and read a lot about Albania and had studied all the World Service broadcasts in recent years, their first statement – I had not expected it at all – was really nothing at all about the substance of the negotiations. It was an attempt by them to put the historical record straight from their point of view. I was accused almost personally of the sins of SOE during the War, of Colonel Smiley, of Kim Philby - others who tried to land agents to overthrow the government in Albania – things dragged out of statements made by Ernest Bevin – it was all thrown at us. How hostile we had been, and how could they ever trust us; even on this day, to let us through their front door. Once they got that off their chest we began to get down to some of the business. There were two things that struck me. They said: "We will never talk to the Americans, and we will never talk to the South Africans". I thought – I can understand the Americans, but what's this with the South Africans? So in one of the little coffee breaks I asked for some clues about South Africa and I was told – I think Israel was thrown in as well – I sort of understood Israel. But anyway South Africa puzzled me. The reason was that Israel supplied arms to South Africa and King Leka, claimant to the Albanian throne, lived in South Africa and was an arms dealer who bought Israeli arms. So I

sort of took that on board and said “Well don’t worry. We’re never going to suggest that the South Africans join us”. But there was an amazing twist to the story later about South Africa. The twist with South Africa was that it was clear from the negotiations that the Albanians wanted the gold physically back in Tirana to put on show to the public. The Bank of England, who held the gold, and were being incredibly annoying about all of this, wanted to be involved in the negotiations. I said to them: “Look you have got the Albanian gold, haven’t you?” “Yes” they said. The Albanians said: “We know our gold. It’s got the Albanian eagle stamped on it”. It had in fact been taken at the end of the War in 1944 in Rome because the Italians had moved the Albanian gold reserves before the War to the Central Bank in Rome rather than keeping it in Tirana, and they again claimed it had the eagle on it. So I thought – I’ll just check with the Bank of England and they said: “Oh no. Gold is gold, you know. You wouldn’t expect to get your own gold back.” I said: “But it’s important for them”. They said: “Well we have got some gold earmarked for them”. I said “Where’s it from?” They said: “It’s from South Africa”. I said: “How do you know”. They said “Because it’s got a springbok stamped on it”. I said: “We cannot give them this gold....” We never told the Albanians and I don’t know what happened; which gold actually went back to them because I’d left the negotiations. But all of these sort of strange things came up. We got quite a long way in the negotiations. They accepted the principle of giving, not our building back, but something else; that they would pay compensation. But they wouldn’t agree the amount of compensation to let them have the gold back.

I was then posted to New York in 1986 so I was out of the loop. But the Albanian Foreign Minister went to every General Assembly to New York for the General Assembly, and so I said to the Office: “Look. I know the talks have broken down, but would you like me just to catch him in one of the lounges and say – what about it? Can we go on?” They said: “Okay”. So I got another brief and I continued the Albanian talks in New York for a bit. We didn’t get very far. The gap was too big. But what in fact had happened, as we learnt later, was that after the death of Hoxha and the take over by Ramizialiah, the decision-making machinery in Tirana had almost ground to halt. No one was brave enough to decide on things and so they couldn’t agree on the Albanian side how they were going to go forward. I later learnt on a visit, after I’d left the Office, to Tirana in my present job, I sought out some of the people who’d been involved in these negotiations. One of them was their linguistic/political adviser, Professor Puto, who was a fairly devious character. He’d been the one, the unofficial who’d sidled up to us in the coffee breaks to say: “Why don’t you do this; or why don’t you do

that?” He said to me that the decisions had been too tough, and I later met the Deputy Foreign Minister, Kaplani, whom I dealt with in New York and he said to me: “Do you know that when the delegation came back, a whole day of Cabinet meetings, sometimes two, was taken on discussing how the negotiations had gone. What was the significance of what you had said.” He gave me some examples. They’d got completely hung up on one of the terms we had used - a “gentleman’s agreement”. They couldn’t understand what that was. I should have realised this wouldn’t be in our favour as it was unknown. They thought it was a very devious type of agreement. It wasn’t really law or whatever. Anyway, that had caused them a great deal of confusion. In a way it was a good example of how difficult it is to negotiate with people who, not just linguistically, are not looking the same way, but who come from a very different background. I suppose it’s obvious and there are far too many examples of it all around the world today.

VC That is an interesting ..

JB It was an amusing period.

VC Should we go to Hungary because there’s a certain flow, isn’t there?

JB Indeed, I think that’s probably better than my time in New York which we can just mention perhaps. It wasn’t terribly relevant to what was going on in Eastern Europe.

VC But the time you were just going to mention the UN. I mean here you are doing something multilateral for the second or is it third time?

The United Nations: 1986-89

JB Well I suppose it was for the third time, but it was in a way a bit of a fluke and perhaps I shouldn’t admit this. I had always wanted a posting in America. I went to high school in New York and I’d always thought that I’d love to be posted to the UN or to Washington, and I’d never managed to. I’d always said: “Can I go?” and they’d said: “No, you’ve got to go somewhere else”. As the Head of Eastern European Department it seemed natural that when I got promoted to the dizzy heights I’d probably go to Eastern Europe, but one by one I saw the East European embassies going to better, stronger candidates, and I thought: “Goodness, what am I going to do?” Derek Thomas who was Political Director at the time, said to me:

“Well, I’m sorry you didn’t get – whatever it was – Warsaw, Budapest – I know you’ve done the work on the UN; would you like to go to the UN and be Number 2?” which was an ambassadorial post. I said: “Yes, sure”. And he said: “Okay, I’ll see what I can do”. And about three days later he rang me up and said: “It’s fixed”. This just shows how times have changed in the Foreign Office. I was absolutely thrilled and I said: “Can I say so? Can I tell anyone?” He said: “Well, you’d better not, because it’s still got to go through the Board, but it’ll be all right”. And sure enough it was all right. I was lucky because I think that – this is being quite a bit more indiscreet – but one of the problems with a Number 2 in New York had always been that it went to someone who had been an ambassador before and ran his own show, and they found it quite difficult. I think the same was true of Washington, to find that you weren’t the boss anymore. You were the Number 2 and had to take your orders and instructions to some extent from someone else. John Thomson was a very distinguished diplomat and had been High Commissioner in India and then at the UN was the Permanent Representative. I think that in London they felt that it would be more satisfactory to have someone under him who hadn’t been an ambassador before, and who would get on with him all right. I knew John Thomson a bit, but not very well. He had a formidable reputation and I was pretty nervous about going to work with him. But the draw of going to New York and being the Number 2 at the UN was much greater than those fears. So I went and I got on with him fine, and with his successor. Most of my time in New York was spent on disarmament in the First Committee and in the Security Council where the issues – everyone thinks who’s posted to the UN, thinks that they were there at the time when it had never been so busy, when all of the great issues of the world were being discussed. I know all of my successors and the subsequent Permanent Representatives. You get the feeling the way they walk quickly down the corridors and shout instructions and stuff, that this is the centre of the universe and they just work absolutely non-stop Every generation feels that. I was in the lucky position that we had extremely capable staff and even in the long periods when I was in charge, there were very good people to do the work and the issues were, when I was there, pretty standard ones. There was the Iran-Iraq War, the Arab-Israel dispute, Cyprus, Central America, continuing stuff with the Argentinians over the Falklands and then the business of trying to improve our relations with the Russians. The most fascinating thing was that on John Thomson’s initiative, the Permanent Five started talking again together as a group on how to resolve the very difficult issue of the Iran-Iraq War, and it was done privately in people’s apartments. We often met in my apartment with the other Ambassadors. The Five started working again in 1987, so it was busy, but it was good fun.

VC And then Hungary?

Hungary again: 1989-95

JB And then I went to Hungary again. It was one of these things where I think there was a bit of competition. It wasn't fixed quite like my job to New York. Derek Thomas unfortunately wasn't Political Director any more and I had to go through the mill, but anyway, I had quite good credentials and I went there. I was sad actually to leave New York, I would have liked to have stayed longer, but I knew that if I missed going to Hungary, it wouldn't come up again on the right timescale, so I went back to Hungary.

VC With pleasure?

JB With great pleasure. First of all I'd got to the stage I think which many colleagues do get to. To go to something completely new at your last but one post, and have to cope with the new language, a new situation and background. Everything is quite daunting. Very challenging. But I felt in a way that I knew a lot about the background. I had been involved in it. I knew a lot of the personalities. Some were my old sparring partners. There were many there that I didn't look forward to working with again, because when I'd left in '83, and also my time as Head of East European Department, I'd made pretty clear that I didn't like the sort of show they were running. But it's a very interesting country. It was on the move and the city and the facilities are terrific. So I was very happy to go there. Thrilled at the thought.

VC I can see that the stimulation of a new post might have been exciting, but you went back at a time when they declared the republic, didn't they? And so it was the beginning of a new era?

JB A year before in New York, before I went back, it must have been '88, Miklos Haraszti, my dissident friend, came and stayed with us. He was the 'Dissident in Resident' in Bard College at the time in New York, and I remember that during the period he was staying with me we talked a lot about Hungary, and he said: "You know, the Communist Party is finished in Hungary. We've got them on the run". I wasn't really following affairs in Eastern Europe at the time and I said: "What do you mean? I just don't believe you". He said: "Yes, they

can't survive". And I thought, you know, here's my good friend whose judgment I really value, but he's almost taken leave of his senses because this isn't the way it's going to come to an end there. It's going to be a gradual evolution. What we'd always hoped for, not a sudden break, that they would become more and more liberal internally, and then we could live with them as European neighbours and perhaps sometime in the 21st century there would be changes. But it wasn't going to be the collapse of the Party. They've got their hands on too many reins and are backed by the Russians.

The collapse of Communism

Anyway, when I went back in 1989 it was immediately apparent to me that what he had said was in fact pretty well true. Power was slipping away. I remember going to see Grosz Karoly, who was the First Secretary of the Party, and he said: "Hungary is like a rudderless ship today." He was the man who was meant to be in charge. The Party had fallen into several traps. They had started talking with the Opposition and every concession that they made, the Opposition pocketed and demanded more. Popular support was running away. The economy was in great trouble. Gorbachev had signalled that the Russians were not going to provide economic support to keep these countries afloat and they weren't going to stay with them militarily. So the writing was on the wall. What happened in Hungary was that – although the Communist Party fought a tough battle to stay in power, often by underhand means - the old guard and the new guard in the Party split. The old guard remained in charge of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party and the new guard formed a Party called the Hungarian Socialist Party, but they failed to recruit any real new members. The old members just didn't pay their dues. I remember being at Party headquarters some time in the autumn of 1989 when one Party apparatchik said to me: "We've just had to sack 800 party workers in this building because we've got no money to pay them at the end of the month". So there were then various challenges and dodges while the Government were negotiating with the Opposition. But it was clear that in the coming election the Socialist Party and the Communist Party were going to be out of power and that is what proved to be the case. The Socialists – some of them did get back into parliament – but they were pretty annihilated. I mentioned that coming back I found myself dealing with the people I'd dealt with before, six years previously, and there they were. The former Number 2 in the Party headquarters Foreign Affairs Department was the Foreign Minister, Gyula Horn, who later became Prime Minister, and was someone whom I'd known since 1982. I think we had a sort of grudging respect for one another, but we were never on the same side. But there was also a whole

group of other people, my dissident friends and others who were then in the leadership of the Opposition parties. So I had a bit of flying start because I knew most of the characters. Not all, but I knew most of them.

VC Perhaps the Foreign Office tendency to post people back to a country where they have been before has advantages?

JB I think it certainly it has – particularly if it's within a reasonable space of time. The new Ambassador to Hungary now, John Nichols, a very able fellow, was there when I was first there in 1980. He was the Second Secretary in Chancery; his first post. So he knows the country well, but he said to me the other day: "The trouble is that almost all the people around then have either gone, or retired, or they've disappeared. They're not there now". On my coming back six years later I found that in the first democratic Government there were four or five people that I had known before who'd been professors at the university or heads of economic institutes or whatever, or I'd known as dissidents. The one that I didn't know was the man who became President, Goncz Arpad, who had been a writer and again this is a good example of the help you get from journalists and from my American colleagues. We knew who was going to win the election. It was going to be either the Liberal or the Conservative Party who would form a coalition. But there was going to be a President and we didn't know who that was going to be. This was of particular significance to me because, the Government was due to change in the first week of May 1990 and in the first week of May we also had a visit planned by the Prince and Princess of Wales for whom the President was going to be the host. So I had a quite practical reason for trying to figure out who would be the President. There were about a dozen names being mentioned of people I didn't know, nor did the staff in the Embassy – no one really knew who it was likely to be. But we reckoned there were about half a dozen of leading contenders. I got help on that from a visiting journalist, and it's awful now, I can't remember which one it was, but also from Mark Palmer, who was the American Ambassador who was very well plugged because he had done something which unhappily the British Ambassador had declined to do; he'd nailed his colours to the mast of a particular political party and had marched with them in demonstrations in the streets of Budapest in the summer of 1989; the year before it all changed, which was quite a high risk policy, but in fact I think it probably paid off. Mark Palmer said to me: "I think the fellow who's probably going to get it is Goncz Arpad". So I invited in turn all of these people to come and have lunch with me at the Residence, and I

said your name – not quite as directly as this – but I said: “Yours is one of the names that’s being mentioned as going to be President. What’s the position? What’s your view?” And some said: “Oh well I know. I’d like to be, but I don’t think I will be”. And others said: “Well, no I don’t want to be”. And others were evasive. But Goncz Arpad said: “No I’m not going to be, because another deal is going to be done though I know my name has been mentioned”. He didn’t say I’m not interested. Anyway, then went on to someone else. And then I heard from the man who was going to be Foreign Minister, Geza Jeszenszky. He rang me one day and said: “We have decided in a deal with the Democratic Forum, the other opposition party, who we’re going to have as presidential candidate. It’s going to be Goncz Arpad”. And it so happened that Goncz Arpad was coming to tea with me about half an hour later and I didn’t realise he hadn’t been told. I said to him: “Congratulations. You’re going to be the President”. And he said: “What. No I’m not.” So that was a lucky strike.

VC He must have been very impressed at the intelligence?

JB He was a very nice man. He’d been imprisoned because of ‘56. He said he’d learned his English through reading Shakespeare and Longfellow in prison, and he’d worked as a translator. One of the curious things was that the Communist leaders, the really tough, bad ones in the 1950s, lots of them wanted to read English literature and they set prisoners, who tended to speak languages or were intellectual, the task of translating English works into Hungarian, so they could be circulated and read privately. So that’s what he’d done. Goncz Arpad was a good friend of mine during that time and it was just fortunate that he would come and have supper, just him, or come and have tea on his way home. It became harder later on towards the end of our time because protocol and all the rest of it took over. But that was as a result of really knowing people before they get to power.

The Transfer of Power

To go back to what was happening politically, the Government changed at the election in 1990 and one of the really remarkable things about the collapse and the changes in Eastern Europe was that on the whole they were peaceful transitions. There was trouble, of course, in Romania, but most of the others just gave up the ghost and went fairly quietly. I think that that was an achievement; a result of the maturity of the Hungarians, Poles, whatever, that they did it like that. But also that those who were going out of power were very anxious that they should not be treated as the then Governments had been in 1946-1947 when the

Communists took over. In fact when I went back in 1989 I went to call on Janos Bereczs, who had been a member of the Politburo, Head of the Foreign Affairs Department of the Communist Party and was, at the time I went to see him, a Communist Party Member of Parliament and Head of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I'd known him before a little. He was a very big shot in the Party, but he remembered me and we talked about what was happening in Hungary. In a rather round about way he said to me very clearly: "I hope that we people who've been in the Party and did our best in Hungary can be assured that you, the Western powers, will make sure that when the end comes, we are not treated as we treated the bourgeois politicians that we took over from in 1947". Some of them were worried that they would be put inside. This became a very big issue in the following years - what was to be done with people who had served the old regime in a criminal way. The change in Hungary anyway was a very gentlemanly business and perhaps I could quote an example of that.

When the Prince and Princess of Wales arrived in May 1990 we had this terrible scramble as to who was in charge, who was doing the programme. The Government was changing at the same time. I went to see Miklos Nemeth, the last Communist Prime Minister, and said: "The visit's taking place. You're going to have your new President; he is still President elect, but it would clearly be best if he is the host". He said: "Okay". I said: "How are we going to do the dinner that the Hungarian Government give for the Prince and Princess of Wales because you're just going out of office. The interest of the British press is in the new one coming in. What can we do?" This is the sort of, I won't say trivia, but the sort of detail which the poor Ambassador gets involved in: who's going to be present at the dinner; who's going to be the host. He said: "What do you think?" I said: "It's your decision, but I think that it would be right if the new Government, although they still don't have any official positions, are clearly there". And he said: "I agree. I will see to it". We knew who the Prime Minister was going to be, Jozsef Antall, but we didn't know who the others would be. And as we walked up the steps in this enormous Parliament building on the night of the dinner to greet the Hungarian line, there standing beside Nemeth, the existing Prime Minister was Jozsef Antall, the next Prime Minister, and interspersed with them, were all of the people who were going to be taking over from the Government. I thought at that moment, it suddenly dawned on me, I felt a great lifting thought: "If they can do that, then the handover is going to work", and it did. And on the day the Government changed the old ministers were out of office. They left their cars. They didn't do any stuff that goes on in the White House like trashing the computers. They left everything. The staff, the bureaucrats, sat in their offices and waited for the new

people to come. Sometimes they waited quite a long time, but as the new people came in, there was some changing around, because they were unhappy sometimes; there were clearly old apparatchiks sitting there as Permanent Secretary in the Ministry. But on the whole the new Government took over the machinery of the old one. Some of them had gone, seen the writing on the wall and disappeared, retired, gone somewhere else. But basically they stayed and worked on so there was continuity.

Another anecdote: One of the things that British Embassies had done in Eastern Europe over the years was to put information about personalities on cards. Because of the paucity of other information this helped when someone was appointed as a Minister or to the Politburo, or as an Ambassador, and people would ask: "Who is he? Where's he come from?" We didn't know. We only got the official biography, which tended to be very sparse. So the cards in the Embassy had built up since 1945/6/7, with entries on them about people's appointments and what British Ambassadors had thought of them, what Chancery Secretaries had thought, and it was very useful. Because it was confidential, some comments were incredibly scurrilous: "I had lunch with so and so. He really is most dreadfully bigoted. He is anti-Semitic although he pretends otherwise. Or this fellow would sell his grandmother". The trick was to get an Ambassador just before he was leaving. Give him the cards of all the people he knew and say dictate something to go on each card, and then they really let rip. We had this great collection of cards. Hundreds of details of Hungarians. And the new Hungarian Government knew almost nothing about these individuals, because they'd been in opposition. They'd moved in entirely different university and professional circles, wrote poetry, or researched in history. For example, they knew nothing about their Ambassadors. Geza Jeszenszky, who was appointed Foreign Minister, came to me and said: "Look, we've got all these people in the Ministry and abroad. You know so and so, don't you. He's the Hungarian Ambassador to the UN. What's he like? Should we leave him there?" I said: "I don't think I can say although these are people that I knew. I may not like them all, but what do you want me to do?" And he said: "Well we're really desperate for information as to what these people are like. Do you know anything about them?" I said: "We've got all these stacks of cards in the Embassy which say where they've been and what they've done. I can't tell you about everyone, but who are you interested in? Who do you want to know about?" So over lunch one day he told me. I didn't hand over anything – but we were able to give them a lot of detail about people who were in their employ. I felt a bit badly about it at the time, but anyway I think it was useful. I hope I didn't get anyone sacked because of this

exchange of information. Some years later, when I was back in Hungary I mentioned to the Head of Chancery: “Do you still records on the cards?” And he said “What cards?” Isn’t that terrible?

VC These computer days they’d at least have been on a computer database?

JB Well, they might have been, but these were all – some even handwritten. So that was quite a loss for the archives.

The Berlin Wall

VC You observed what was going on around you and there was this phenomenon wasn’t there, of East Germans coming through Hungary? Did you report on that?

JB Yes we did. Because one of the really critical parts of the collapse of the regime, was the collapse of the Berlin Wall. In September of 1989, Budapest was packed with East Germans, mostly in their cars who’d been on holiday on Lake Balaton or in Bulgaria and Romania, waiting to see what was going to happen in East Germany and particularly in Berlin, and whether they should go home to get their children back into school, or whether, if they waited a bit longer, outside East Germany, they might be able to make it to the West. The critical thing was that, until then, there had been a secret protocol between the East Germans and the Hungarians that any East German passing through Hungary would not be permitted to leave Hungary into Austria unless they had an exit visa stamped in their passport. In other words East Germans were permitted to visit the Socialist countries, but not to go to the West. The Hungarians had agreed to turn them round at the border and say: “No you’re going East again. Take the road to Bratislava”. There was a great mass of people waiting. They were in their cars and flooding the West German Embassy. It was a big crisis. They were everywhere in their Trabants, camping in the streets. The Hungarians and Gyula Horn, the Foreign Minister, I think, took the decision, although Nemeth claimed that he did it, and said: “We’re not going to send these East Germans back to East Germany. They can leave Hungary through any of our borders that they wish to: to Yugoslavia, to Austria”. They opened the Hungarian Border. Now Horn has subsequently claimed that he paced his office at night over this terribly difficult decision whether they were going to break the Socialist brotherhood or serve the cause of liberty type of stuff. Nemeth said later to me here in London that he’d taken the decision as well. But in fact it was taken by the Hungarian

Opposition; this was a big public issue. There was absolutely no way that the Hungarian people would have sent them back. They would have stood in front of the road to stop the East Germans going back to another Socialist country. There was also physically no way that the Hungarians could have compelled these people to return. So it wasn't a Communist Party decision. It was just the tide of history that made it happen. But it was a very dramatic time I have to say.

VCThe story of Diplomatic Service life really?

Visitors: Ministers and the Royal Family

JB Because it was a period in history, we were simply deluged with official visitors after the fall of the communist regime. There were some who came before. Two perhaps worth mentioning. Michael Heseltine came privately in September of 1989. I think he went to Warsaw, the Czech Republic and to Hungary. He was a backbench MP and he came just to have a look. To see what things were happening. He wrote to me and I said: "Come and stay with us". He brought his wife and one of his children. He was very engaging. I enjoyed it very much and he said that he would like to call on various people. I was very new then, but thought I'll take him to see Grosz Karoly, the Head of the Party; he's the right person to talk to. I went to see Grosz before and said: "I've got Michael Heseltine coming. He's a Conservative. He's just a backbench MP, but one day he may be the British Prime Minister. He's fallen out with Mrs Thatcher and although he's from the same Party, he's her opponent. He's a rival." I wanted him to understand this. The idea that you could be in the same Party and ultimately in opposition. Something not understood by the Communist mind. "Yes, yes", said Grosz. "Bring him. I'd love to talk to him if he's going to be the Prime Minister, sure." We turned up and Michael's all there ready and I'd briefed him as well - Grosz Karoly understands your position exactly. Karoly greets him with: "I'd like you to know Mr Heseltine, that I am one of Mrs Thatcher's greatest admirers". This was meant to be a compliment. His face fell.

Douglas Hurd came in the spring of '90, before the changes had taken place, to have a look around. He met the Opposition leaders and met the Government. I had been pressing the Department in London to invite Party leaders who were likely to be successful in the election, particularly Jozsef Antall, who was going to be the Prime Minister, to come on a visit to London. The Department had said: "No, we're too busy. There are too many visitors. We

can't take him". And Douglas Hurd said to me: "Have we invited Antall to London?" I said: "We haven't invited him because the Department say that the Foreign Secretary is too busy and the Prime Minister's too busy". And he said "Oh". The day after he got back to London I got a telegram saying: "Please issue the invitation." Antall, a Conservative, was a great hit with Mrs T, although I think she found him a bit longwinded. They got on pretty well. But what I was going to say was that as a result of all these changes we were deluged with visitors. Following the Prince and Princess of Wales in that summer I think we had six Cabinet Ministers that year and 14 other Ministers, we had a visit from Mrs Thatcher and Denis, we had the Heads of all of our Armed Forces who wanted to come and see the enemy kit. You know, talk with the new Warsaw Pact people. Make them democratic forces. What they really wanted to do was to fly MIGs and drive T72s and so we went through all of that bit as well. We had a terrific lot of visitors and it turned the Embassy into, to some extent, an American Express operation, which was very interesting for me because we saw all these people. But it made it quite hard also to keep track of what was happening within the new Government and all the different personalities and opponents.

VC Fascinating. A last thought. A Royal visit. Any comments?

JB We had plenty of that. The Prince and Princess of Wales came together in May 1990, as I said, and there was terrific excitement because they were a real glamour couple. I remember Patrick Wright, then the Permanent Secretary, sent a telegram to get me on my toes saying that they were an enormous – not weapon, but an enormous assistance to us in our foreign policy. That this beautiful couple could do far more to pursue British interests than almost anyone else he could think of. And it was true and everyone took a shine to them. Although at that time things were really on the rocks for them, I didn't spot it at all. They spent a lot of time with us – three days. She joked about him. We were entranced with her. They both came separately on different visits in later years. The Duke of York, Prince Edward, the Prince and Princess Michael several times, and then we had a State visit. We had Princess Anne. We had the State visit and that was a great event because it was the first that the Queen had made to any former Communist country. So it was planned in great detail, with a strong political message. She came in 1993. Antall was still Prime Minister, still alive. He died the following year. It was from the British point of view a mark that Hungary was back in the democratic Western fold. Whether that's entirely true or not, I'm not sure. Certainly

in the Western fold and democratic but there could be undemocratic things that still go on. But it was a great event.

VC And useful as a tool of diplomacy?

JB Well I think one has to say it was, and of course I wrote glowing things at the time and said how useful it had been. It had. Like the Prince and Princess of Wales, because it put us on side with the Government who used the occasion to terrific advantage in terms of publicity and to put across their message of legality. It opened up to us a vast range of people in Hungary we couldn't otherwise have touched because masses of people wanted to come and meet the Queen and be present at receptions. I think it did help us. Of course it was a great deal of work, but that was all worthwhile. Political memories are quite short though, and we can't have a State visit every year. It probably gave us a very warm glow and put us in a good position perhaps for a year, but then other things take over. In Hungary the Government changed and although the new Government had all been present when the Queen came, I remember that they all turned up. They wanted the Queen there as well – an occasion that they didn't want to miss. For me it was a good occasion because the Ambassador gets the chance to draw up the first draft of the speeches, so you can say the message you want to get across. I enjoyed it enormously. The Queen is a very easy guest. So is the Duke of Edinburgh. Everyone, even foreigners, seem worried about what they're going to say and how they're going to behave in the Royal presence. I can't say that for me the thought was at the outset entirely reassuring, but they put you at your ease very quickly. One of the things I found very interesting is that the Queen, who I'd only talked to a couple of times before, was very interested in Romania. She talked about the dreadful experience of having Ceausescu to stay. She was interested in what had gone on in Romania after the War and she knew all about King Michael who'd come to her wedding in 1947. And she knew a lot about Eastern Europe. It was a rather strange contrast with Mrs Thatcher, who in 1990 had questioned me a lot. In a way it was briefing. Why should she know about history. After all she'd not been dealing with State affairs in those years, about what had happened at Yalta and what had happened in the Communist takeovers, how the Communist Parties, many of them, had come from Moscow. The Communist Parties in exile had taken over. Why, she asked, when most of these countries were anti-Semitic had there been so many Jews in the first Cabinets and first Governments in Romania and Hungary? People say she never listened, she just talked. Actually she did listen. She wanted really to know these

things, but I was surprised – perhaps a comparison one shouldn't make, between the Queen's knowledge and the Prime Minister's knowledge. On that occasion, and on that subject, the Queen had the edge.

The Diplomatic Service

VC So Hungary was an enjoyable and fitting end to a very distinguished career?

JB Nice of you to say distinguished. I think I was just fortunate to be in places where things happened. Yes. I was in Hungary for very nearly six years which is longer than most people; certainly than they get these days. I think it was partly that they didn't know what to do with me. Half of the posts I thought I might get didn't materialise at the three year point. Perhaps I owe it to the Queen that I stayed so long in Hungary. I had nothing to do with it. It was all fixed. I was just told that a State Visit was going to happen, and it would be more sensible if I stayed to cover it. But it would mean that I would not have enough time to go afterwards to another post. And for me it was very satisfactory. It gave me more knowledge of a place than you get in three year postings. I'd been there before and had struggled with the Hungarian language, and I was very happy.

VC You never regretted your choice of career then?

JB In a way I have done. One of the advantages of the Diplomatic Service is that once you get started on it, you're hooked. Unless you're incredibly able and can move easily into other things or do something terrible and get chucked out, you get a variety of work and postings and you move around and you meet fascinating people – it's not like working in a lawyer's office where you tend to stay with the same people all your life. You have a great range of contacts both British and abroad. But I would like to have tried something else - journalism or banking or being a carpenter. As I said at the beginning, when I started I thought "Well maybe a few years, if I don't like it". But then I did like it and the Service treats people pretty well. I know that there are complaints. But when I see what happens in other walks of life, I think the Service is still a good organisation to work for. It's extremely loyal and everyone is helpful to one another. Sir Leslie Fielding, a former member of the Service, who became the Director-General for External Affairs in Brussels, said to me that people locked away their own papers in Brussels and didn't let other people see them. There was an

element of competition. If you had a good idea you didn't want to share it with someone else who was likely to take it and claim it as his own. I never found that in the Service. I lived in fact on taking other people's ideas, not pretending they were my own, but using them as the basis for something else, and people helped one another. It was always a team effort. In business, for someone to do better, someone else has got to do worse. That isn't what happens with us. But I would like to have tried something else and now I have.

VC But that's not a bad epitaph on the Service is it?

JB I think most people feel that way don't they?

VC Thank you very much indeed. Thank you.

Transcribed by Evie Jamieson

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