

BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF MRS HEATHER THOMSETT

(NEE AUCHTERLONIE),

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY

SUZANNE AND PETER RICKETTS

SR: Today is 30 August 2024 and we're talking with Mrs Heather Thomsett (née Auchterlonie) at her home in Kent.

Foreign Office, London 1943 - 1947

Can we start right from the beginning? You were at secretarial College. Can you tell us why you decided to join the Foreign Office, because this was in the middle of the war, in 1943, when you were only 19, wasn't it?

HT: Yes. I was at St James' Secretarial College which was in Grosvenor Place in those days, although most of Grosvenor Place was bombed out. They sent me for an interview at the Foreign Office and there was something about it, I don't know why. Yes, something appealed to me. I can't tell you exactly what ... probably the history of the place and the sheer building itself possibly.

PR: Did you speak French?

HT: Yes, I had some French. They were keen on the secretaries having French.

I first had to go into what they called 'the Pool' to learn the ways that the Foreign Office did things. I suppose I was in the pool for about one month. It

was marvellous, because if a department was overloaded and needed extra help you were sent. I remember one of the first people I was sent to was Gladwyn Jebb. Anthony Nutting was another one.

SR: You were obviously given a lot of responsibility very early on, even though you were a very new entrant.

HT: I suppose so. At the time, you didn't think about that, somehow. Rather, it was what you were there to do and you got on with it. But, looking back on it, it was an interesting time, really.

PR: You did shorthand and dictation, did you?

HT: Yes, that's right. Then suddenly, the person who ran the Private Office, Barbara Evans, who'd been there for a long time, sent for me and asked if I would like to go into Private Office. I said yes!

SR: Were there any inducements? Did you get a raise in salary?

HT: Oh, no way! But it was an interesting job, looking back on it. Not well paid, but a good job. It was after the bad bombing in the East End of London, but we still had air raids. They dropped the odd bomb in St James Park, but actually I don't think the Foreign Office was ever hit. The windows were blown out, those lovely, tall windows.

PR: Were some of the girls sleeping in bunks at night in the basement?

HT: No, but you had to be prepared to work late. [Winston] Churchill used to wake up and want to work when everybody else wanted to go home. So, occasionally, you had to work late. They put me a camp bed up in the little room next to the Foreign Secretary's room by the lift. Was it the Marshal of the Diplomatic corps? Sir John Monck in my time. But that didn't happen very often, actually.

SR: What were the members of the Private Office like? Were they kind to you?

HT: You mean the men?

SR: Yes, the diplomats, because of course they were all men in those days!

HT: Oh yes. Pierson Dixon was the chief one and then Nicholas Henderson. There was Guy Millard and Valentine Lawford. Then latterly there was John Henniker-Major, when I went to the Paris Peace Conference.

It was a very happy atmosphere. Mark you, I think people then pulled together a lot. There was a great feeling of camaraderie. That's a lovely feeling to have, isn't it?

PR: Did you go and have dictation with Anthony Eden?

HT: Oh, yes. I didn't go immediately but after I'd been in the Private Office for about a month. Suddenly there was a light that would go on and a bell would ring when he pressed the buzzer. Out of the blue, Barbara Evans turned to me and said, 'You go. Hurry up!' So you just had to. The nerve racking thing was that you had to go through those lovely double doors. Double doors into the diplomats' large room. You had to walk through there and across to another lot of double doors.

SR: Intimidating!

HT: Yes, it was a bit! In those days, he sat with his back to the fireplace. The big desk was there and there was a chair by the side of the desk. I supposed that was for me so I pottered over and sat down. He was very short sighted, but he didn't like to admit it. He pushed his glasses up and said, 'You're new, aren't you?' 'Yes!', I said.

SR: At least he noticed. That was good!

HT: He was always very charming although he could be quite demanding, but then so he should be. How can I put it? A real gentleman, yes. He was always beautifully dressed.

It was a good feeling in that obviously he and Churchill got on very well. Churchill would feel free to wander across in his siren suit. It was so different from how obviously things are these days.

Occasionally, we had to go to the House of Commons if there was a big speech going on. So it was a fascinating job. You saw a lot of interesting people who came to see the Foreign Secretary, naturally. The press conferences were held in the Ambassadors' Waiting Room at the top of the stairs. Sherry and canapés were offered and the office keepers, who were so good, would knock on our door and offer us any leftovers, saying 'Glass of sherry, Miss'. That was very nice. That was the kind of atmosphere then. There was a real buzz, lots of activity and a sense of camaraderie. When I visited the Foreign Office earlier this year, I really felt it had lost its soul. It seemed empty and lifeless.

SR: What was the Foreign Office like to work in?

HT: It was freezing cold in winter! There were big fireplaces and the office keepers used to make up the fires.

You had to go in through Downing Street as that was where the main entrance was. The other end was the India Office, yes. Leo Amery was the Secretary State for India. The Home Office was on the Whitehall side.

SR: Can you remember the Durbar Court and the Locarno Room?

HT: The Durbar court was full of communications equipment. Lots of Nissen huts. I never really saw the Locarno Room because it was all boarded up into little cubicles. The Southern Department was in there. I had no idea that it was the wonderful, grand room I saw a few months ago.

PR: Can you tell us about travelling with the Foreign Secretary?

HT: Yes. This was the time of various conferences in Tehran and other places which I didn't go to. But my turn came when Yalta was coming up, they asked

Pat Gawn and me to go. (Two secretaries went to the conference and two stayed at home).

PR: Did you go out ahead of the of the main party?

HT: Yes, we had about four days, maybe five. Of course, Malta had been badly bombed, but the bombing was early – was it 1942? Anyway, compared with [the] UK, which was being bombed all the time, it was quite a holiday. There weren't any hotels open, though, so Pat and I had to sleep in the YWCA on the ramparts of Valletta. There was no hot water. We just slept there. Our office was on board HMS *Sirius* in Malta dockyard, the headquarters of the Mediterranean Fleet, so there was a big presence there. The RAF's base was at Luqa, now Malta airport.

PR: Travelling by plane in those days was pretty hairy, wasn't it?

HT: Oh yes. The service planes. We had a Lancaster bomber to Yalta and I can't remember what we had from Lyneham to Malta.

PR: Was it a York?

HT: That's right! Yes, the Americans called the Yorks 'flying coffins'! You were only allowed a holdall for your belongings. Not that that was difficult because everything had been rationed in the UK for such a long time you didn't have much to take.

PR: You were very lucky because the next York that came out crashed. It had Peter Loxley and Pat Sullivan on board. Awful.

HT: Yes, they all went. I was good friends with Pat.

PR: They were basically working for Sir Alexander [Cadogan], I suppose?

HT: Yes. We only heard that the afternoon that we were due to leave for Yalta that evening. We had to fly overnight from Malta to Yalta. That day, [Franklin

D.] Roosevelt came in in his big battleship into the harbour and went straight to the airport.

It was quite a thing because the Malta airstrip is very small. There were all these planes taking off. It was the assembly point for leaving for Yalta. We travelled overnight on the floor of a Lancaster bomber and we were all given a little box with a sandwich in or something.

I was a bit surprised to see my neighbour, a secretary from the Cabinet Office, pull out a pair of pink slippers from her bag. She told me, 'Well, if I'm going to die, I might as well die comfortable!'

After landing in the Crimea, we had an eight-hour car drive to get to Yalta. Pat and I were in a car with two of Churchill's secretaries. Elizabeth Layton was one and was Marion Holmes the other? The four of us felt a bit shabby and dirty having slept on the floor of the plane. But the whole thing was superbly organized, really.

PR: Did you come across a lady called Joan Bright?

HT: Yes! She went ahead and organized everything.

PR: She wrote a book which I've read. She started as a secretary, I think, and then rose to this position of organizing all these huge summits. What was she like?

HT: I didn't know her well, but what I do remember is how she looked. The rest of us were in skirts and tops. She had a navy dress and immaculate white collars. Very smart!

SR: Was she a bit of a dragon?

HT: Not really. She was obviously a very highly organized lady. But I didn't have much to do with her as such.

PR: You were told where to sleep and have your breakfast?

HT: Yes. All the diplomats, apart from Churchill and Eden and probably Sir Alexander were in Alupka, the Alupka Palace. We had a villa about a mile or so away, a lovely, lovely spot on the Black Sea coast. But a lot of the beautiful villas had been shelled and whatever. We ate in Alupka. Mealtimes were rather like boarding school except we had pink champagne and caviar for dinner! Once again, there was a great feeling of camaraderie there. All the diplomats were very nice.

PR: You rub shoulders with people on a trip like that, don't you?

HT: Yes, it was a nice feeling. We were even allowed to see [Joseph] Stalin who came to dinner. There was an armed guard behind every shrub!

When we were leaving, that's where the RMS *Franconia* came in. We were taken to Sebastopol and I had a night on the *Franconia* and then was told how I was going to get home. We were all split up: we didn't come home as a body. Eden went on to Greece to see General [Ronald] Scobie. On my plane there were a couple of naval captains and an army chap. I didn't know any of them. We were due to go back via Malta, refuel and then go on. But in Malta the plane became unserviceable and we were stuck there without any transport and nobody to organize it for us. So the army took charge of us.

I remember we stayed in Tigné barracks, yes, and hoped to be able to be put on a plane to get home. A false hope, because all the planes coming through were full of servicemen coming back from the Middle East. They were refuelling in Malta and going on so we had a wait. Eventually they found a Dakota which took six of us, I think it was, and that was fine. We flew as far as Marseille and refuelled there. But when we took off again, the hydraulic system blew up and there was oil running down. The Canadian pilot told us we had to circle for a bit because we were full of fuel. So we circled and then I remember the pilot

saying, 'I have to tell you, this is what's happened. I'm not sure that the wheels will come down, but if they do come down, I'm not sure that they'll hold. But in any event, I don't have any brakes.'

SR: Goodness!

HT: But, luckily, it was Marseille and not Malta. If it'd been Malta, we'd have been off the end and into the sea! But Marseille is flat and there's plenty of space.

PR: Flying in the wartime was not for the faint hearted, was it?

HT: No! So were stuck again. It wasn't easy. Eventually we had to split up because, once again, there planes were all full. In the end, two of us ended up in Lyneham and then we caught the train back into London.

I do remember finding it funny at the time, walking down Whitehall and going into the Foreign Office. In Private Office they said, 'Oh, hello, where have you been?' When you think about it, that was ridiculous!

SR: Did you carry a mobile typewriter with you or were the typewriters provided at Yalta?

HT: This was all part of the admin ahead. I physically didn't have to carry a portable machine. Eden always had the big print typewriter, as did Number 10 and, sure enough, there was a big print typewriter there.

SR: Am I right in thinking you actually typed up the Yalta Agreement?

HT: Yes. We had to have three top copies, one for each delegation, though I don't know whether the ones I typed were the ones actually used. But I remember clearly you weren't allowed to make a mistake, of course. The Russians wouldn't have that.

When you think of the organisation to get the *Franconia* there in the first place and to have everything ready ... it was quite a thing.

PR: I read that there were 750 people in the British delegation. Huge.

HT: Yes ... when you think about it, all the communications went via them. That wasn't on the doorstep, it was quite a little way down.

PR: And then you went to Washington and San Francisco, so you had two very exciting trips.

HT: Yes, they were. We celebrated the end of the war in Europe in San Francisco. Eden threw a party on top of the Mark Hopkins hotel. He went home shortly after that. They were short-handed so I stayed and I was actually in San Francisco for another month or more and then came home. The election was pretty smartly as I got home. And of course, Churchill was out and Ernest Bevin came in. So I had nine months, or nearly a year, with Ernest Bevin. I went to a bit of the Paris Peace Conference for about six weeks. Bevin was a very different character, but quite charming. He was short, fat and not good-looking or well-dressed but kind and a sort of father figure.

PR: In San Francisco, you must have been with Sir Alexander quite a lot?

HT: Yes, he was the head of the delegation. Yes, he came to Washington for the funeral [of President Roosevelt], when Eden represented the British Government. Lord Halifax was the Ambassador then.

PR: What was Sir Alexander like? He was a reserved person, wasn't he?

HT: Yes, reserved on the outside, but very nice. I remember having to work late one evening. There was Eden and Sir Alexander and probably Lord Halifax, I can't quite remember now what on earth it was all about. But I do remember Sir Alexander standing up for me, saying, 'Speak up a bit. You can't expect Miss Auchterlonie to hear!' That was so nice of him.

Then they all went off to bed. I was in a hotel somewhere down Pennsylvania Avenue and by this time, it was midnight. I do remember Eden saying, 'Oh, don't bother about that tonight, my dear. Tomorrow morning will do.' Well I thought, 'To get it tomorrow morning it has to be done tonight!'

PR: Great men are still like that, by the way!

HT: Having done that, there was nobody in the Embassy. I don't know what I thought I was going to do. I can't remember his name now, one of the First or Second Secretaries, extremely tall and very nice, said, 'Oh, hello. What are you doing here?' I said, 'Well, I've just finished.' He asked where I was staying and promised to give me a lift downtown. He was a great big tall chap and had the smallest car. He said, 'Don't worry, but the brakes aren't very good!'

SR: You did live dangerously!

HT: Yes. But people generally were nice: we were all in it together in a way. That was the thing, really.

PR: On the way back from San Francisco, there was another aircraft which crashed killing the Legal Adviser, Sir William Malkin.

HT: Yes, the whole lot went. The plane just disappeared. I was due to go on that one to come home: my case was on board. But then, at the last minute, I had to come straight home, direct. I never saw my case again as the plane just disappeared in the Atlantic, in the Bermuda Triangle.

PR: Wartime travel by air was pretty dangerous, wasn't it?

HT: Indeed! A number of the secretaries were on board, including someone who worked for Sir Orme Sargent, Jane [Clarkson Scupham] and Joanna Cole-Hamilton (who worked in Southern Department in the Office). They all just disappeared. Nobody ever knew.

SR: Terrible.

PR: Do you have any particular recollections about some of the other big characters? Sir Orme Sargent for example?

HT: He was very nice. Commonly known as 'Moley'.

PR: He was said to have a sharp tongue and be witty.

HT: I didn't come across him that much, to be honest.

PR: Lord Halifax was a great gentleman as well?

HT: Oh yes. There was that awful time when I got to Washington and Sir Alexander and Eden disappeared, were swept up. Off they went and left me just standing there! What was I supposed to do? The Press Secretary chap (Richard Piercey, I think) came up to me and said, 'Why don't you come and join us? We're just going to have lunch in the canteen.' I said, 'How very kind. That'd be lovely!' So we went to the canteen. I had only just sat down and an official came and asked, 'Is there a Miss Auchterlonie here?' I said, 'Yes!' He said, 'They're waiting for you at lunch'. Well, I was only 20 and I thought, 'Oh, dear!' And so off I pottered and there they all were in the Residence. I don't know whether I looked terrified, but I felt it. But Lord Halifax said, 'Come along, my dear, come and sit by me'. Wasn't that nice?

PR: A great honour!

And you stayed on under Ernest Bevin for nine months or so?

HT: Just about a year, yes. And then, of course, the peace conference started in Paris. I went over when it first started and we lived in the George V!

SR: Not bad!

HT: It costs you money to breathe in there, doesn't it? In those days, the British delegation had taken it over. I've forgotten which floor it was. I shared a room

with a charming Canadian called Osla Benning. I'm not really sure what she was doing, but she ended up marrying John Henniker some years later.

SR: Then after that you left the Office to get married?

HT: Yes. I left in July and I was married in the middle of August, to a naval officer whom I had met in Malta on board HMS *Sirius*. We were lucky with our postings in the Navy. We had a three-year posting back in Malta.

SR: Just like The Queen!

HT: Yes! We also had the usual UK postings in Chatham, Bath and Plymouth. Our last post was Singapore, where we spent three years. Just before we gave it away! My husband used to say it was a good job he was retiring shortly because everywhere he went, we gave it away!

SR: Just to finish on your Foreign Office career, you had four terribly exciting years during the war.

HT: That was the time, wasn't it? Things were happening all the time you see. Yes, there was always something going on. There were preparations for the D-Day landings and all this sort of thing. It was all happening.

SR: You were very young, so I expect you just took it all in your stride as if it was something completely normal.

HT: Well, it was a job. You didn't really think about it too much! And I never regretted taking the Private Office job. The situation was changing from day to day. You never knew what was going to happen really. It was hard work, because you never knew what hours you were going to work. But I did enjoy it. That's important, isn't it? That was the time we lived in.

The war went on 24 hours a day, didn't it? So there were people there overnight, doing communications and telegrams. And Eden himself was very much part of it all because he had a little flat up at the top.

PR: By the Resident Clerks?

HT: Yes. If he wasn't eating out or something, one of the old office keepers would pop out into Whitehall and get him a pie or something from ... what was it called, not Lyons ... the little shop at the top end.

HT: As I said, there was something about the Foreign Office, the building ... I was very fortunate to end up where I did. It was a great place.

SR: You say you were lucky, but you must have been good. You talk modestly about your work having to be accurate, but they only take the best people in Private Office so they must have spotted your star quality very early on!

Thank you so much for allowing us to record these fascinating recollections. We wish you a very happy 100th birthday in November!