

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

EASTWOOD, Basil (Stephen Talbot) (born 4 March 1944)

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BASIL (STEPHEN TALBOT) EASTWOOD CMG

interviewed by Malcolm McBain on Friday, 23rd September 2005
for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme.

Education and background

MM: Now could we start by listing for the record your education and family background?

BE: Family background: my father was a Civil Servant; he was actually in the Colonial Office apart from stints in the Cabinet Office and briefly as Commissioner for Crown Lands. I was born and brought up in Beaconsfield in Buckinghamshire. After the War my father commuted to London every day. I was educated at Eton - where I got a scholarship - and then Merton College, Oxford. I went up to read History but actually changed to reading Arabic, and I joined the Diplomatic Service straight after University in 1966.

Appointment to Arabian Department in the Foreign Office in 1966

MM: Could you tell me what you first did when you went into the Foreign Office?

BE: I was taken off to the New Entrants' Course on day three and told to go and join the Arabian Department because, as my new boss Frank Brenchley said, "You should at least know where these bloody places are."

MM: And after that?

BE: Well, I was on the Bahrain/Qatar desk, so I was responsible for relations with these two vitally important places, one of which I'd never even heard of at that stage, I have to say.

MM: Which was that?

BE: Qatar!

MM: And you were soon selected for language training.

BE: Well, I had, as I said, studied Arabic at Oxford but I'd only done it for two and a bit years and the Foreign Office, quite rightly, took the view that I needed to update that and modernise it before joining an Embassy, so I went off after one year to MECAS. I was in Arabian Department, I suppose therefore, from Autumn of 1966 through to about the same time - September, I would think, of 1967. So I was in Arabian Department at the time of the Six Day War, which was quite exciting although I was not in a front line position obviously. I went out to Lebanon shortly thereafter when things were still fairly tense.

MM: What was the position of the British Government at the time of the Six Day War?

BE: Well, at the time of what was known as 'The Big Lie', the sheer political incompetence of Gamal Abdul Nasser had involved the Arabs in a war for which they were totally unprepared and for which the Israelis had been longing. The Israelis took full advantage of the golden opportunity they'd been offered and knocked out the Egyptian Air Force on the ground on Day 1. The Arabs simply didn't understand how this disaster could have come about and therefore produced the idea - I think there was some intercepted telephone conversation between Nasser and Hussein about this - that actually the Brits and the Americans had been involved in some way in the attack on them. This was The Big Lie for which there was absolutely no foundation. And the result was that some of my earlier memories of the DS were of a whole lot of somewhat disconsolate diplomats coming back from the Middle East when they'd been burnt out or thrown out of their various posts. I began to wonder slightly what was happening, why I'd joined this outfit. (At the same time, if you remember, our people in Peking were being attacked by the Chinese mob). As a young man, it didn't worry me too much, I have to say, but it began to appear that I was in for a fairly eventful career.

MM: Had you decided at that stage that you wanted to specialise in the Middle East?

BE: Oh yes. I had made that decision rather by default when I decided that I was going to do Arabic at University. What actually happened was that, after I left school, I was one of the early VSOs and taught in a school in Lebanon outside Beirut, Brummana High School. It's still there. It was a wonderful time in my life and I travelled around a bit; I got into Syria and down to Jerusalem - I spent Easter in Jerusalem in 1963 and was absolutely fascinated by the whole business of the Status Quo and the situation of the Holy Places and so on. And I went down to Petra and did all the things you could do in those days, but it was fairly rough and ready and very exciting. And so, when I went back up to University, my main instinct was to try and get back to that part of the world as quickly as I could.

I have to confess there was one other motive. There was a very old lady living up in the village who was a Quaker, an Arab called Faridi Akl. She had been a schoolteacher at the Friends' School at Jbeil (Byblos) down on the coast, before the First World War, and had given Arabic lessons to a young Englishman who was going out in advance of a walking tour of the Crusader Castles in the Levant. His name was T E Lawrence. So I actually had the same Arabic teacher as T E Lawrence; she was a pretty awful teacher, I may say, dear old lady at that stage. Perhaps she was brilliant when she taught him, I don't know! But it was a wonderful thing to capture the imagination of a young man.

MM: Did you feel that you were perhaps to some extent seduced by the Arabs, or by Arab culture?

BE: I think from a very early stage I had what I would call the traditional Foreign Office Arabist attitude towards the Arabs, which is a sort of despairing affection: they are always their own worst enemies and have a much better case than they ever get round to making. And, as it were, having been part of the background, particularly to the business with Israel, since the early 1960s when I first started learning about all this, because some of my friends in Brummana were Palestinian, clearly ...

MM: When you say Palestinian, do you mean Jewish or ...

BE: No no - Arab. There were very few Jews still left in Beirut at that stage, but I didn't know any of them. No, I mean I was certainly more aware than the average reader of a British newspaper would be of the Arab side of the story of the creation of the State of Israel and so on. But I would like to think that I was never blind to the multitudinous Arab failings, as the story progressed.

MM: You mentioned that your father had been in the Colonial Office. Do you mean 'Office' as opposed to Service?

BE: I do mean 'Office' as opposed to Service. He joined the Home Civil Service and chose, as bright people did in those days, to go into the Colonial Office, as a place where you could do good work. He did, however, have one overseas posting, and that, interestingly, from your point of view, was Private Secretary to the Governor - or was he High Commissioner? - in Palestine. So, when I went to Jerusalem, I met some people who knew my father from those days; old Palestinian families.

MM: A good introduction anyhow.

BE: It gave me an interest in the region for a start, but that was a long time ago; it was when he was very junior in the 1930s.

MM: So that's a good start. Now MECAS: that gave you an advanced knowledge of Arabic. What about Arabic culture?

BE: Well of course there are lots of different Arab cultures. I was only there for five months because I only did the Advanced Course. I already had a lot of background on the Islamic world and Arab history and so on - much more than most of my MECAS contemporaries - because of my Oxford degree. But it was quite an eye-opener for me because these were slightly tumultuous times. They had this thing called the language break when people were normally encouraged to go off to the far corners of the Arab world and do something interesting but, in the latter months of 1967, this was thought to be too difficult and dangerous and so a whole bunch of us went and stayed in a small Christian village in Lebanon called Wadi al-Araiyyish - it's very very small; I don't think you'll find it on a map. It's tucked high into the hills behind a place called Zahle. I think my first introduction to the local Lebanese culture was the first evening. The family that I was quartered with had moved out of the best bedroom for me and I emerged from the bedroom waving a pistol which I'd found under my pillow, saying "*Shou Hada?* (what is this?)" And they looked at me askance and then looked at the pistol and said, "I'm terribly sorry - it's not loaded!" This was a Christian village fairly close to the Muslim area down in the Bekaa valley and this was normal hospitality - that you made sure that your guest was suitably protected. We had a wonderful, rather bibulous time there. We took over the village school for a final party and we invited the whole village - there were about four or five us MECAS students I think - and we bought vast quantities of arak, locally distilled sort of anise, which was consumed in large quantities. It was a very jolly evening. It was not the sort of occasion that you expected to get in the Arab world. That was one introduction.

As for traditional Arab culture, I think I knew more than most of my colleagues in MECAS because, at that stage, not only had I spent a year in Lebanon, I'd also spent a summer vacation out in Tunisia when I was at University and had spent quite a lot of time in Turkey; I also studied Turkish as a subsidiary at University. So I'd been around quite a bit.

MM: And then you were posted to ...

BE: Saudi for about a year and a bit. Jeddah. I was the Information Officer. Nobody really quite explained to me what the Information Officer was meant to do; it was all a slight mystery to me. I did go on a course on information work in London before I went out there, which proved to be almost entirely irrelevant to the situation in Saudi, which was always different from anywhere else.

One of my major duties was every fortnight to receive through the Customs some large sacks full of ready-addressed copies of the fortnightly magazine put out by the BBC Arabic Service, called Huna London (London Calling). One of my first real experiences of what you might call sharp-edged diplomacy was when the whole consignment was impounded by the Saudi Customs. Why? Because the magazine had a lead article called 'This inhabited globe'. It was all about man's changing idea of cosmography - you know, how people had at one stage believed that the world was a disk on the back of a turtle floating in the Cosmos and other such ideas. And on the cover was one of those amazing photographs, the first photographs of the Earth taken from space in glowing colour. The whole thing was impounded by the Saudi Customs because Saudi doctrine was, for all I know still is, that the Earth is flat.

MM: Really?

BE: I had a curious conversation with the Director of Customs who, I think, knew that this was nonsense but he had his instructions and he had to stick with them. We eventually reached a negotiated agreement: I gave him my word of honour, which still counted for something in those days, that I would ensure that the cover was torn off every copy of Huna London before it was issued. This involved taking Huna London out of its wrapper, tearing off the cover, rolling it up and putting it back in, and so on. That was fine, except that it was a lot of jolly hard work. I had to get all the Embassy cleaners in to help, but the amusing thing was that the article inside was completely unchanged and displayed at the top right hand corner at the start of the article was a miniature photograph in black and white of what had been on the front cover. So everybody who received this knew exactly what had been torn off and why! So the Director of Customs went away thinking he had done his duty, and I went away thinking that my point had actually been vastly reinforced by this outcome. So we both ended up happy.

But it was a - how shall I put it? - a rather unsatisfactory job in many ways and, after I'd been there about a year, the inspectors came, actually while I was away on leave, and my job was cut. And so I went back just to clear up and await orders for my future transfer - to the great grief of the young girl

who'd turned up there as governess to the Ambassador's children and who is now my wife. The Ambassador was Willie Morris who had a family of slightly rowdy boys. I thought she had rather a super job there. It wasn't bad for single girls in general in those days. She did that for a year but left shortly after I did. We then got married half way through my time in Sri Lanka, which is where I then went.

Posting to British High Commission in Sri Lanka in 1969

MM: That's a bit of a contrast, isn't it - Sri Lanka!

BE: Yes, it was a rather curious situation. I had had this slightly unsatisfactory job in Saudi Arabia but there was an awful lot that you could do. Then the job was cut, and I received a dramatic telegram saying, "Colombo needs Eastwood. He should get there as soon as possible." I left within about forty-eight hours - I thought there must be some tremendous crisis. I had one overnight stop in Teheran, and arrived in Colombo jetlagged and weary to discover a post that was very comfortably staffed in the way most Commonwealth posts were in those days and somewhat bemused to receive me. I think it was within a week of having said that, yes, they could find a use for me.

MM: Probably thought they were doing you a favour!

BE: They probably thought they were doing me a favour! The really disorienting thing, though, was - you know how it was; you arrived and were shown to a desk and there was a collection of useful papers including recent office circulars. I opened this file and the first office circular was called 'Bag Services' and it started off "Since there are two Thursdays in this week ..." Thursday was the day that the Bag arrived. It emerged that, in the hope of getting re-elected, the right wing (rightish) Government had introduced a Buddhist lunar calendar so that you had lunar weeks, which meant to say that, every so often, you had to have an eight day week. So you didn't have Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday etc. You had Poya day, which was the day off, preceded by Pre-Poya and then you had P1, P2, P3, P4, P5 - and sometimes you had P6. Anyway, this was a week with P6! It was, as you say, something of a contrast from Saudi Arabia when we just had to cope with Sun time and Jeddah time and various other things, but that was a daily hassle.

MM: So what were you basically doing in Colombo?

BE: I was the dogsbody in Chancery. The Sri Lankans had an election coming up and there was a job to be done, and I had a very happy time. It was the sort of country where you could go and talk to anybody about anything and I raced around the country going and seeing all and sundry. I remember I ended up by making a massive report on what I thought was going to happen in the election, and I got it completely wrong because, of course, people I knew and had introductions to were in some way related to the existing power structure and they'd all deceived themselves into thinking that it was going to be an election like any other. In fact it was a complete landslide for the opposition populist Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

MM: Was it 'Sri Lanka' then?

BE: At that stage it was still Ceylon. It became Sri Lanka while we were there and broke the link with the Crown too. It was a very interesting lesson for me to learn - a very good lesson for a young diplomat to learn. Basically one should never prophesy, especially the future. I think I wrote an extremely interesting report which had validity in its own right, but the predictions were just wrong. My overwhelming feeling at that stage was that I was that I was wasting my time; I was writing fascinating material about a country that London was simply not interested in.

MM: Who was your High Commissioner?

BE: Angus MacKintosh. He'd been an old Commonwealth officer I think for many years. Nice man. And there was a Deputy High Commissioner called Jim Dutton and then subsequently John Nicholas. Peter Maxey who was Head of Chancery went on and ended up, I think, as Ambassador in East Germany.

MM: Did you appreciate the difference between a Commonwealth post and a Foreign Office post? I mean quite apart from the question of staffing? There was a different philosophy, wasn't there?

BE: Did I appreciate it? I certainly noticed it. It wasn't just staffing; there was a sort of, how shall I put it, a change of culture going on while I was there. Jim Dutton, who was part of the old spirit, was very much involved with the remaining tea interests. It was part of his job. He was supposed to concentrate on the economy. And I think Peter Maxey and I represented, as it were, the slightly new Foreign Office influence coming in. We were slightly more hard-nosed, 'what is the British national interest in this?' That sort of attitude.

MM: The Commonwealth Relations Office was really trying, to begin with at any rate, to cultivate the idea of a club, the Commonwealth, and that meant fostering all kinds of links that weren't strictly speaking obviously in the British national interest.

BE: Maybe so. I don't think that impinged too much at the sort of level of activity that I was engaged in. I was not doing a great deal of the international stuff; I was focussing almost entirely on the domestic internal stuff.

MM: Of course, by this time, 196 ...

BE: I went there in 1969 and left in 1972.

MM: The joint Foreign and Commonwealth Service had been established and that would account for your sudden posting to a former Commonwealth post.

BE: Yes. The new Diplomatic Service was in existence from the time I joined, I think. We still had separate offices in London - I can't remember when those were actually united - but I remember as a new entrant we were talked to by the two PUSes playing Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, deferring ostentatiously to each other; Paul Gore-Booth and Saville Garner addressed the new entrants together.

MM: Anyway, so that's Colombo and, on leaving there in 1972, you went to Cairo.

BE: Yes. I should just say that the time in Colombo was not without interest because, after the election which Mrs Bandaranaike won by promising jobs to all the unemployed, including a whole lot of unemployed and unemployable young graduates in Buddhist Studies who knew nothing about anything, you had the most extraordinary home-made attempt at a putsch. They'd all been reading, would you believe it, the Thoughts of Kim Il Sung as published in the local newspapers and had imbibed his doctrine of Juche, self-reliance. They had this extraordinary idea that they were going to take over the country by attacking every police station in the country simultaneously, more or less with their bare hands or with hand bombs. The signal for this was going to be a phoney death announcement put out by Colombo Radio on one evening's six o'clock news. They usually had a great string of death announcements. On hearing the phoney announcement the local groups of conspirators were going to assemble to attack their local police stations at ten o'clock, I think was the time, the

following evening. The newly elected Government of Mrs Bandaranaike, which had sacked the whole of Special Branch when they came in, had no clue of what was going on and would have been sitting ducks had it not been that one group was so excited that they went and attacked a remote police station in the outback on the same evening as the announcement. You had an extraordinary situation whereby the Government was scrabbling around and somebody said to them, “in the days of the old Special Branch they wrote a rather good report on this.” Of course the old Special Branch had destroyed all its records. And so the new Chief of Special Branch was running around to us and the Americans saying, “Do you know anything about a rather good report by the previous Head of Special Branch called something like ‘The Storm is Coming’ about North Korean-inspired insurgency”. The Government read this rather hurriedly and declared a curfew shortly before the attacks were due to take place, and the whole thing went off rather at half cock as a result.

But for our last few months in Colombo, we couldn’t travel around the country and it was all a bit claustrophobic.

MM: Were there any signs of Tamil discontent in your days up in the North?

BE: You had two sorts of Tamils - you still do. You had the so-called Indian Tamils who were the workers who had been brought in by the Brits to work for tea estates up in the hills, and you had occasional labour unrest up there. And you then had discontent amongst the Tamils of the north and west who were the, again for the most part as it were, Scots. They were very keen on education and on seizing every opportunity that opened. They had therefore done very well for themselves within the colonial structure and Government Service and so on. The new Government that came in with Mrs Bandaranaike was essentially a Sinhalese Nationalist Party, and this attempted simultaneous coup d’état which I talked about was actually also a Sinhalese Nationalist affair - it was something called the Janata Vimukthi Peramuna. The net effect was that the Sinhalese became, as it were, more and more dominant. Sinhalese became not merely in theory but more and more in practice the only official language. It had been that for some time actually, and a Sinhala Only policy was something that Mrs Bandaranaike’s late husband had brought in. The Tamils felt more and more excluded. You could see that there were the beginnings of a problem but we had no idea that this violence, which at that stage was intra-Sinhalese, was going to become a Tamil/Sinhalese thing on the scale that it did. Although there was always an undercurrent of violence in this wonderful country, I don’t think we had any inkling about the appalling butchery that the Sinhalese would indulge in against each other and against

the Tamils. The Tamils responded in kind and demanded their own homeland in the North and East. No, it was still the sort of emerald isle in those days.

MM: What about British interests in the tea industry? Ceylon was very important in tea production.

BE: Tea was, and still is, very important. The tea industry was in a very bad way because tea prices were very low. High quality tea was not being bought. Tea has had something of a revival since then in many parts of the West, but most of the tea companies were making thumping losses and it was no longer practicable to maintain expatriate planters to run the tea estates; there were fewer and fewer of them. There were continuing difficulties about the pension funds for those who had spent their whole working lives in what became Sri Lanka and had pensions expressed in rupees that were becoming less and less valuable. And then there were foreign exchange difficulties in getting things out and so on. Tourism hadn't really started - there were one or two nice hotels being built but some of the big hotels, like the Mount Lavinia and Galle Face Hotel, had enormous rooms with slow-moving fans with birds' nests in them, and everything in need of a good lick of paint, and probably a good deal more. But it was a wonderful country.

Posting to Cairo in 1972 and the Egyptian Israeli war in 1973

MM: Anyhow, you went from there to Cairo. Direct transfer?

BE: Direct transfer, yes. Derek Day, who was Head of Personnel, came through Colombo on a pastoral visit and Alison backed him up against a wall at a cocktail party and told him very firmly that I was completely wasted in Sri Lanka and ought to be moved, and what about Cairo! And we got a direct posting.

So I arrived there in 1972, shortly after Sadat had kicked the Russians out. In 1971 he had kicked the left wing Ali Sabri out of government; in 1972 he kicked the Russians out, just in time for the October war in 1973. Sadat liked to say that he believed in taking one decision a year and those were the decisions for those particular years!

MM: Important ones! And the 1973 war was not a particularly good decision was it?

BE: From his point of view? I don't know. I think it is part of Egyptian mythology now that it was a thoroughly good decision. It was very interesting; I think we had slightly more inkling than the Israelis did about what was going to happen but, like everybody else, there was an element of strategic surprise that was very carefully maintained for the outbreak of war, largely because Sadat played a sort of - how shall I put it? - a 'cry wolf' game by having major exercises with his troops, moving them up, moving them back, moving them up, then back on exercises all the time. For the Israelis, it became too easy to say, "Oh it's another exercise! We won't bother to put our chaps on alert. And anyway, they can't get across the Canal and, if they do get across the Canal, we'll blow them away with our air superiority." In fact, Egyptian strategy was much more nuanced, to begin with at any rate. They used high-pressure water hoses to blast holes through the great sand dunes that the Israelis had built on their side of the Canal, to cross the Canal, but did not advance into the depths of Sinai so that their troops were still under the cover of the protective umbrella of their surface-to-air missiles posted on the West Bank of the Canal. So the Israeli Air Force couldn't do much about it. The element of surprise was totally maintained. It was an amazing achievement by the Egyptians, and it restored Egyptian pride, apart from anything else. There were various other aspects, but it was very interesting that he sent his troops across the Canal shouting, "Allahu Akbar!" Nasser had been relatively secular, you'll remember. Sadat was calling Islam in aid. Sadat had also changed the name of United Arab Airlines to Egyptair. He was reasserting both Egyptian nationalism as opposed to Arab nationalism, and Egypt's Islamic identity.

But it was more sophisticated than that. My Ambassador, Philip Adams, got instructions from London twice during the war to ask Sadat personally whether he was ready to stop the fighting: the first time was, I can't remember the dating now, but fairly soon after the start of hostilities. He found Sadat in military uniform in the Army headquarters in a bunker in Heliopolis in north-eastern Cairo, and Sadat said, "No! We're doing very nicely thank you." It would be quite interesting to look back and see the telegram that Philip must have sent but basically Sadat was giving the impression that all was under control and he knew what he was doing.

Then Sadat had actually conned Hafiz al Asad into joining this two-pronged assault on Israel by telling him that it was to be an all-out assault. The Syrians very nearly succeeded in driving the Israelis off the Golan and were stopped by the Israeli Air Force within a few yards of the edge of the escarpment. The Israelis realised that Sadat was not going to attack further into Sinai, and so they were able to turn the full weight of not only their Air Force but also their armour on the Syrians, who were then driven right back and were in imminent danger of being driven right back into Damascus, and God knows

what was going to happen there. So there were anguished and extremely angry exchanges between Sadat and Hafiz al Asad. “Why aren’t you taking the pressure off me by attacking in Sinai? Why are you just sitting there waiting?” And the honest truth is that it had never been the Egyptian game plan to do more than, as it were, create a new situation.

It was a very polished diplomatic operation. The first morning of the war, Philip Adams said to us, “Right! By lunchtime I’ve got to send a telegram to London saying what we think Egyptian war aims are. I want you to go out and talk to anybody you think can tell us anything.” And this was quite a challenge for diplomatic staff at an Embassy, as you can imagine. I knew one person who was, in theory, out of favour. Tahsin Bashir had been the official Government spokesman. He’d been parked, so it would seem to the outside world, as Chef de Cabinet to Mahmoud Riyadh who was the former Foreign Minister, again in parking orbit, as Secretary General of the Arab League. I happened to know that Tahsin Bashir was still a consultant to the Egyptian Intelligence Service but didn’t know that he knew that I knew! So I rang up Tahsin and said, “Look, there’s something going on this morning; I’m not absolutely clear what, but I think you know what’s going on. Could I come round and talk about it?” And he said, “Right! How soon can you get here?” So I said, “Give me twenty minutes.” I dashed round to the Arab League building, found Tahsin sitting in his office drinking coffee very peacefully with another man, who’s since become much more famous, called Usama al Baz. Usama was at that stage a Director of the Diplomatic Institute, the training institute for the Egyptian Diplomatic Service. I subsequently discovered that he too was a consultant to the Egyptian Intelligence Service. Anyway, they explained that no, actually the war aims were pretty limited. It was not to conquer the whole of Sinai militarily but to ‘move the situation’ - to create a situation which was inherently untenable in the long run for Israel and for the international community. . Anyway, we sat and had our cup of coffee and I went racing back to the Embassy - I remember I came back in, going in through the double doors and racing up the stairs. Libby Adams, the Ambassador’s wife, saw me and (she was the mildest of persons) said, “Basil! You’re behaving as if this whole war was laid on for your benefit!” Very exciting times!

But it was brilliant little diplomatic operation by Tahsin and Usama because it was completely unusable intelligence, if you see what I mean. My report informed Philip Adams’s telegram but it was information that came from people who were, in theory at any rate, not in the inner circle.

Anyway, then what happened of course was Hafiz al Asad screaming blue murder, “You’ve got to take the pressure off me!” Sadat’s nerve broke - he knew that he’d basically conned Hafiz al Asad - and he ordered his troops to advance into Sinai towards the Mitla and Giddi passes. So they moved out from under the umbrella of their surface-to-air missiles and, of course, the Israeli Air Force turned on them with enthusiasm. That created the opportunity for the Israelis to counter-attack and drive a hole through the Egyptian positions all along the east bank of the Canal, and actually to cross over at a place called Deversoir, the diversion place on the Canal.

By the time Philip Adams got his second set of instructions to talk to Sadat, Ariel Sharon and the Israeli Forces were careering around on the West Bank of the Canal, as it were, on the Egyptian side, wreaking havoc in the Egyptian Army’s rear areas. We knew that; we weren’t absolutely sure, because the situation was clearly chaotic, that Sadat knew it. But, when Philip went in, he found Sadat in civilian clothes this time, sitting in the gardens of the Kubba Palace drinking a glass of limón under a mango tree, and he said, “No, I don’t think it’s gone on quite long enough yet!” The situation, in fact, got worse and worse as far as the Egyptians were concerned, with the whole of the Third Army, which was on the southern part of the Canal, being holed up trapped in the city of Suez. And so the Army was actually cut off; you had Israeli Forces on the Suez-Cairo road and Sadat under extreme pressure to save his Army by capitulating to Israeli demands.

On the other hand, by that stage Henry Kissinger had got involved, and that was really what Sadat was after. He wanted to draw the Americans in to do something about all this. The Israeli situation was not, in fact, comfortable because they’d had to mobilise all their Forces. It was quite impossible for the Israelis to maintain full mobilisation which they would have to do in order to keep the Third Army trapped in Suez. So first Kissinger negotiated the first disengagement agreement, which basically freed up the Third Army and gave the Egyptians a little bit of land on the other bank, so that they’d won a mighty victory and got the Israelis to back off, as it were, the Egyptian side of the Canal back into Sinai. It was very interesting because the Egyptian ploy was to ensure that any interim solution was not going to be durable, and could not be durable, so the first disengagement agreement was not going to be durable. The Egyptians knew that there had to be a second agreement, which then took the Israelis all the way back to the Mitla and Giddi passes in the middle of Sinai. It was quite difficult. I don’t think one really saw - at least I didn’t see - the logic of all that as it was happening quite so clearly. One was a bit too bogged down with the pressure of daily events to see it. So there was a fair amount of wisdom from hindsight about that.

But your first question was ‘Wasn’t it a bit of a disaster from the Egyptians’ point of view?’ The answer is not a bit of it; Sadat actually got out of it what he wanted. It was war as an extension of diplomacy when diplomacy had failed. It actually gave the diplomatic process such a jolt that it actually took him half way to where he wanted to be; it then needed another jolt, which was his trip to Jerusalem - which took place after I’d left - to take it the rest of the way, to get Sinai back. Part of the interest of all this was that it was based on an assertion of Egyptian, as opposed to Arab national interest, and we were watching all that with great interest at the time.

MM: At that stage, who was financing Egypt?

BE: The answer is nobody! There was, before 1973, a gap period after 1972, when the Russians were thrown out. The Russians had basically been giving Egypt and Syria weapons on tick, and I think to some extent that may have gone on; the Russians may have had a feeling that, if they stopped, their situation would be even worse. After they’d thrown the Russians out, the Egyptians knew that the state of the armed forces was going to deteriorate very rapidly. The October war, however, had the double benefit, as far as the Egyptians were concerned, of reasserting the Egyptian leadership of the Arab world; you know, “We are not hopeless when it comes to military matters! And you, O Arab brethren - O rich Arab brethren - have done incredibly well out of this as a result of the oil crisis and the boost in oil prices. Come on, pay up!” So that the 1973 war was not the start of Arab funding of the confrontation states, but it was a quantum leap in the amounts - I can’t remember the figures now.

MM: Oil prices quadrupled.

BE: Something like that, yes. And you know, there was also this business of the oil weapon. I don’t know to what extent that was built into the Egyptian planning but it certainly was a time of sudden wealth in the oil-producing States. When I’d been in Saudi in 1968, Saudi had been broke. Old King Saud had driven the country to near bankruptcy and King Faisal was desperately trying to restore the country’s finances. It was not a country flush with money. Mark you, there was money even then to do what needed to be done, in relation to the oil industry and so on, but it was not ...

MM: Well that wouldn’t have been Saudi money necessarily.

BE: No.

MM: So, in this period - we're talking about a period ending in 1976 when you moved away - Egypt was beginning to get money from Saudi Arabia.

BE: Yes. When I arrived in Egypt in 1972, there was only the American Interest Section of the US Embassy with one well-known CIA man, one administration officer who was the Head of the Interests Section, and one bright young Political Officer, and that was basically it. By the time I left, you had Herman Eilts who was Kissinger's right hand man on the Middle East (who is still very alive incidentally. A great man in many ways), desperately trying to keep his Embassy small and manageable and eventually failing; it's now one of the largest American Embassies anywhere. And the start of a major American aid programme to Egypt.

MM: Oh that started then, did it?

BE: Well it started then; of course it was the Camp David meeting that really made it take off.

MM: Which was when?

BE: Oh, when was Camp David? 1979 or something like that. I ought to know this off the top of my head and I don't. I wasn't involved in that at all; I wasn't involved in the Middle East at that stage.

MM: I was wondering about the long-range outcome of the 1956 Suez invasion of Egypt (by the UK, France and Israel). Had that faded from the scene completely, or were there still echoes of it in your time?

BE: Oh, I think that had faded from memory. Of course there was resentment of the imperialists, but those went back to the old days of Empire rather than 1956. The 1956 aberration had I think more or less been forgotten. Sir Harold Beeley and co. had seen to that shortly afterwards; it really didn't last very long.

MM: Interesting country, Egypt, I think.

BE: And still, for better or for worse, the intellectual hub of the whole Middle East.

MM: So, have we dealt with Egypt?

BE: Yes I think so. I mean, I could go on talking about it for hours but I think you've probably had most of the stuff that would be of interest to you.

MM: Thank you very much. So your next appointment was on loan to the Cabinet Office.

Appointment to the Assessments Staff of the Cabinet in 1976

BE: Yes, I was on the Assessments Staff, writing the first drafts of reports for the JIC, basically, on Arab/Israel and Lebanon which, at that stage by 1976, was degenerating into civil war. We were getting into a situation where we were writing two or three media assessments a week issued direct from the Middle East Current Intelligence Group. I was writing these things as the Lebanon just went from bad to worse, with the appalling breakdown of that veneer of civility which I'd found so attractive when I was there.

I remember one particular incident when ... I can't remember which; was it a Christian group capturing a Muslim area or t'other way round; it might have been either way - and not content with butchering the inhabitants, they dug up and desecrated all the graves. And you know, you sat in London and thought, "This was a country I knew and loved. What's it doing to itself? How is it ever going to recover?"

I did that for two years. After about a year and a half, nearly all of it on Lebanon, I became increasingly anxious to do something else; emotional strain, if you will. I understudied the one old boy who did all the assessments on Africa. Rhodesia was his main task, but there were other things going on at the time, such as the Somali attack on Ethiopia. So I found myself getting involved in African affairs increasingly.

MM: While you were still in the Cabinet Office.

BE: While I was still in the Cabinet Office. It was very interesting and rather revealing. I don't know if you remember this but Somalia actually was a Soviet protégé state and it launched a full traditional military attack on Ethiopia. I was basically writing the assessment with one bright young desk officer in the Foreign Office who was taking a keen interest, and one half-pay Colonel in DIS (Defence Intelligence Staff) who provided the military component. And there we were, providing the

assessments. The Americans suddenly decided that this was a really hot topic and they needed to make sure that they were at one with their UK allies, and could we please host a confabulation of analysts and so on. So the Head of the Assessments Staff, a man called Perry Rhodes, said, "Yes of course!" Anyway, they brought over, I think it was, an Assistant Secretary-type person and it must have been about a dozen analysts from different organisations and so on. We were trying to pretend we had a full team as well. Actually, the Head of the African Department and so on were fielded to come and pad it out. But among those people the only ones who actually knew what was going on were the three of us! It was good fun!

MM: How many did the Americans produce?

BE: Oh I don't know; they had a dozen analysts and a whole lot of, as it were, policy makers as well. We took over a large and rather glorious room in the Cabinet Office. So they were impressed by the surroundings and went away quite happy.

The other thing I do remember about the Cabinet Office was that I was understudying Colonel Paul Moir, who wrote all the assessments on Rhodesia. I was therefore reading all the Rhodesia intelligence - reams of this stuff coming through. What was fascinating was that Paul used to look at this stuff and say, "Hmph!" Basically anybody who knew anything about Rhodesia was able to disregard 95% of the intelligence. But anybody who didn't know anything could have taken that other 95% and concocted almost any story they liked out of it. It was a situation in which every agency on this earth was desperately trying to find out things, so they were all paying different informants or the same informants, and swapping intelligence; you had circular intelligence going round at the speed of light. It needed a very wise old head to say, you know, "95% of this is rubbish!"

So I learned quite a lot from watching Paul. Every now and then when Paul was taking leave or was otherwise absent, I had to write the assessment. Fascinating time.

MM: Is this what has been happening in relation to Iraq, do you think?

BE: I was not involved but I would guess that it was what happened over Iraq before the invasion, yes. And actually I think that the process was in fact deliberately distorted and managed to some extent by particularly Ahmad Chalabi who was feeding intelligence into different networks which then confirmed each other.

MM: But was the same degree - well, I know you're not intimately involved in any of this now - is there the same degree now of wise old heads and experienced people in London who understand about the Middle East?

BE: I can't comment seriously. Of course my view is that the outcome would seem to show that something went disastrously wrong and that this may be the reason for it. But I wasn't involved in the Iraq thing; I was in Switzerland at the time. I received the famous dodgy dossier and I regret to say that I believed it was my duty to go and make representations based on it. I actually believed it, and sort of went and sold it to my clients as being the real McCoy. But I think you have to go back not so much to my time in the Cabinet Office or not only then, but to my time as Director of Research. The job of the Intelligence Analyst is to provide policy-relevant but policy-neutral analysis; that's the traditional Anglo-Saxon function. The French by contrast never make that distinction at all, between policy and analysis. You have your Centre d'Analyse et Prévisions in the Quai d'Orsay which equates to the Planning Staff and the Assessments Staff. French analysis often seems to be policy-influenced. , In our case over Iraq the policy and analysis did seem to get mixed. Though, how shall I put it?, there's an intellectual argument to be made that a purely policy-neutral analysis is not really possible in a situation where your analysis itself is affecting policy, because that policy then becomes part of the situation that you are trying to predict.

MM: Difficult isn't it.

BE: Difficult!

MM: But anyhow, the theory behind it all is policy-neutral.

BE: Policy-relevant is the main thing. You have to ask yourself the right questions because nobody's going to read bits of paper which are on subjects that nobody's interested in, though sometimes you have to bring things to people's attention on the basis that they ought to be interested in them. But policy-neutral. I do think that, in relation to Iraq, the thing became a sort of self-reinforcing process.

Transfer to Personnel Operations Department of the FCO in 1978

BE: Yes, but not back into the main building. At that stage Personnel Department, which is where I was sent, was in Curtis Green building facing the Embankment. Indeed, when I took my leave of Michael Jay as PUS early last year, I was able to tell him that I hadn't actually worked in the main building since 1967, because Research Department, when I was there, was in OAB (Old Admiralty Building). In 1978 I was in POD (Personnel Operations Department). As an Area Officer, I was responsible for postings at all levels to the Americas, Australasia and the Far East. That was Area 4 - can't remember who did what at that stage. Jeremy Greenstock was doing something, Jim Hodge was doing one of the other areas and David Logan was one of the other areas, I think. Obviously we weren't involved particularly in the senior grades, as they were called. But you had these meetings when the postings recommendations from POD for various boards were decided. So I attended the Grade 4 groups, Grade 5 groups, Grade 7-8 grid. My Postings Officer did the Grades 6 and Grade 9. I was responsible for taking a general interest in all grades and the welfare of the posts. This was in the unreformed days and, what was the phrase? 'An Officer was expected to take an intimation that he should proceed to a certain post as an instruction and not a request' - something like that in the Diplomatic Service regulations! And you were, if you were sensible, in the habit of coming into Personnel Department to find what jobs might be coming up and to express your views about them, but you had no idea what was actually going to happen or whether your views were taken into account or not. And what happened at the grid, which sounds a bit like a mediæval torture instrument, was a process of negotiation between the different Area Officers who had - how shall I put it? - very split personalities. On the one hand, they regarded themselves as having a responsibility towards the career development of the officers in their areas. If they had an officer who had said, "Look, I really need to get out of the backwoods now. Please can I have a posting to a multilateral organisation," or whatever, it would be the duty of the Posting Officer to argue at the grid that this was the time for Nick to get that sort of job. And you knew all these people; you were colleagues. On the other hand, you also had to fill the jobs in your area; the business of the Service had to be done. The result was that there was a sort of trading that went on. If you were to take so-and-so you would say, "Would you feel able to take so-and-so for that? And I know he's not the strongest horse in the race for that particular post but, if he doesn't get that one, he's not going to get this, that nor t'other. And then he's going to be in real schtuck, so come on lads, let's give him this job." That sort of argument went through and you did get people into jobs, and it was a little bit rough and ready but, by and large, I like to think that it worked. OK, it had a human face, and a human face that you could live with, but when we went into the canteen, we tended to lunch together! We thought we were doing the best possible.

Now what have you got? Coopers and Lybrand came in and produced an extraordinary reform plan which, to Coopers and Lybrand's great surprise I'm told, the Foreign Office bought hook, line and sinker. As a result, you have a completely paper-bound procedure so that anybody can bid for any post, whether they're a credible candidate for it or not. The members of the Board get Board Briefs that size, and they would be inhuman if they actually managed to read them unless they had special interests in this or that post. It has not by any means ended cynicism about the process and it has created a wholly new problem which is the multiple rejection syndrome. A person, possibly through his own fault may have bid for a whole lot of postings but nobody has the responsibility of saying, "Nick may not be the best man for that job but it's the only one he's going to be really good at. And I say let's give it to him." I don't think it's actually made for a happier Service. I remember talking to John Kerr about this and I think he agreed actually, though John's attitude was that the best postings were those when he lit another cigarette and went and had a look out of the window at St James's Park and said to himself, "Why don't we give such and such a post to so-and-so?"

But anyway, I'm an old fogey now, so I'm allowed to say these things.

MM: There have been some jolly funny ambassador appointments recently.

BE: Ah yes, but you have to promote the young and pushy! It happens in other careers as well. My daughter is a young barrister and she was saying rather - she's doing quite well for herself and got tenancy in her Chambers and so on - but she remarked at one stage that she'd have had a better chance in her Chambers if she'd been one-legged, black and lesbian.

Posting to Bonn 1980

MM: Careful, careful!! Anyhow, you went from there to Bonn. What year was that? 1980?

BE: 1980. I had a very odd job which had in fact been created by Nico Henderson who'd left by this stage. I was the one person in the Embassy responsible for both political and economic aspects of the European Community, as it then was, and I was both the Senior First Secretary in Chancery and subsequently Deputy Head of Chancery, and part of the Economic Section. Head of Chancery was Alistair Hunter and the Economic Counsellor was John Boyd and subsequently Adrian Beamish. The Ambassador was Oliver Wright. It was very interesting; it was the time when Maggie Thatcher was

saying, “Give me back my money!” And of course we basically needed to persuade the Germans of the merits of this. Since they were going to have to find an awful lot of it, it wasn’t very easy.

MM: Wasn’t it a question of our paying less rather than continuing to pay a large subvention to the EU?

BE: Yes, at that stage, the way in which it was done was enormous enhancement of the Regional Development Fund with special projects in Northern Ireland and so on. Of course it was a political haggle; the mechanism was Maggie Thatcher saying, “I’m not going to pay.” But that would not have been easy since what you were talking about, our technically own resources (?), VAT and so on, you know ... The solution, actually, came after my time.

It was also the time of the Falklands War over which the Germans were uncomprehending of why we were doing what we were doing. My colleague who was responsible for what was called the Bonn Group, dealing with the Russians over Berlin, was very interesting. He said the Russians completely understood; it was a matter of national commitment; if you’d made a commitment, that was it - you stuck to it and that was it; otherwise every other commitment you made would be worthless. And we were trying to argue this with the Germans. Some of them understood this; insofar as Berlin depended upon the credibility of our defence of Berlin, Berlin was safer for what we were doing in the Falklands. Some Germans understood that, but they found it very difficult.

MM: That is astonishing, really, isn’t it.

BE: It is just that the use of force was something which was anathema to the post-War German generation.

MM: That’s continued, really, hasn’t it. Again ...

BE: Now the Germans are getting involved in deploying the Bundeswehr across the world and so on, in support of international operations, but it’s a ...

And then we had major problems on the Pol/Mil side. I wasn’t involved in the particular politics of it, but it was the time of the Doppelbeschluss. Helmut Schmidt had been persuaded that there was a gap in the Hierarchy of Deterrence; that it would be possible for the Soviet Forces to launch the traditional

armoured thrust through the Fulda Gap onto the North German Plain, and the vastly smaller Allied Forces would have had to go straight to strategic nuclear deterrence because though they had battlefield nuclear weapons they wouldn't have had anything at the medium range level to deter this attack;. And the theory was therefore you had to deploy the new Mittelstreckenraketen medium range missiles). This meant that they had to be deployed on German territory. Schmidt was persuaded of this; we were persuaded of it; everybody in NATO agreed this; the German public, however, was not.

I do remember, one Saturday morning when I was the duty officer, an enormous demonstration came down the B9, the road outside the Embassy which was known as the Diplomatenrennbahn, the 'Diplomat's racetrack'! Outside the Embassy there was only, in those days, a fairly low metal fence and I looked out of the door to see them ceremonially burning a large Union Jack on the fence. Somewhat timidly, I had to receive a delegation coming to protest - or I agreed with the police that I would do so. They were really on their way somewhere else so that we weren't actually going to be seriously attacked. But it was quite striking to think back that, at that stage, the Embassy just had a low fence around it that any man could have vaulted across. It didn't have serious gates. There was a field at the back with sheep in it. We then had to have increasing levels of security built in more and more; the fence got higher and higher, stronger and stronger and so on.

It was a good time; I was dealing with some very interesting subjects and, as Deputy and occasionally Acting Head of Chancery, I had to take an interest in basically anything that affected British/German relations, which was almost anything. Bonn being, as we all know, 'A Small Town in Germany', I had a house with a nice garden I suppose ten minutes away from the office.

MM: Were you on the same side of the river?

BE: Same side of the river, yes. I didn't have to cross over. There was one of my colleagues who was living in the house in Koenigswinter where le Carré had lived but, because I had a large family, we were living in Counsellor Row in Im Etzental up behind the English church in Bad Godesberg. There's a lovely passage in the early part of 'A Small Town in Germany' where the counsellors and their wives all turn up for Sunday church and they greet each other as they come out of their front doors to walk down the road to church and, quite without thinking about it, all fall into protocol order before going into church. At that stage, very few of us went to church and I wasn't a counsellor anyway, but it was still the same place.

The other thing that took a great deal of time - I should perhaps mention this since we're talking so much about official business - is that I was very much involved in setting up the Embassy Dramatic Society in Bonn as I had been in Cairo. We had the great advantage, though, of having a Chaplain who was a retired actor, and Lady Marjorie Wright who was a keen amateur actress. They had actually had a production of *Blithe Spirit*, with Marjorie as Madame Arcati shortly before I arrived there, but they decided to do something to follow this so we did 'The Importance of Being Earnest' shortly after I arrived.

MM: I know what she was!

BE: She was indeed an absolutely superb Lady Bracknell. It was a wonderful production. Another staggering production, I remember, was 'Murder in the Cathedral' which we did with Alistair Hunter playing the role of Becket. He was Head of Chancery at the time when all hell was breaking loose around the world and somehow managed to learn his lines impeccably. I'm glad to say that, despite the fact that the Embassy has now moved to Berlin, that particular dramatic society is still going strong.

MM: In Bonn?

BE: In Bonn!

MM: Who's maintaining it?

BE: Well, because it wasn't just the Embassy; it was extended to anybody who wanted to speak English. It was still called the Embassy Players when we were there but it's now called the Bonn English Players, I think, and still going strong.

MM: That's a remarkable achievement, really, isn't it. A cultural link!

BE: Oh yes. And we were not just doing easy things. OK, to get the thing going, we played a sure-fire winner like 'The Importance of Being Earnest'. I remember we did 'The Day in the Death of Joe Egg' which I directed. I don't know if you know the play but it's all about a couple whose marriage is being torn apart by having a severely disabled child. That was really moving and difficult stuff. And there was a lot of outreach into the community.

MM: Into the German community!

BE: Into the German community, yes! We did that one in a German school hall and the lead actor and I went and talked to an English class about the play beforehand and subsequently one young boy - he was only about fourteen or something; we must have talked to a junior class - came and joined and was a keen member of our society and subsequently went on to make quite a career for himself on the German stage.

MM: Did you speak German?

BE: Yes. I'd been to Germany as a boy; my family had always believed in the importance of languages, so I'd been to stay, aged I suppose fifteen or so, with families in Schleswig-Holstein and Hamburg.

MM: I note you came out (in this interview) with fluent French at one stage.

BE: Well, I've always had an inferiority complex about my French; I think many people do. I think the French like it that way! But I've never actually had a seriously French-speaking posting until this last one in Switzerland when I had to use French down in the Romandie. But I coped well enough.

MM: German would have been more important in Switzerland.

BE: Not really, actually. It was more important to be able to read the NZZ (Neue Zürcher Zeitung) and listen to the radio and watch the television. But Schwyzzer Dutsch varies dramatically from one Canton to another and is pretty incomprehensible to a normal German speaker, so that Swiss programmes that are taken by German television actually have sub-titles.

MM: Do they!

BE: So the other thing from Switzerland, which is jumping ahead a bit, is that, because the German speakers don't actually like speaking what they call Schriftdeutsch (written German), which is for them a foreign language too, and equally they equally they don't like making the great concession to the French of doing everything in French, an awful lot of business is done in English. Internal Swiss

business is done in English increasingly. Slightly funny English. If you go on the Swiss railway and look out of the window, you will see every so often you've come to a place where there are works on the line, there are notices saying, 'Stop! Risk!' What they mean is 'Danger, Keep Out'! But those two words, 'stop' and 'risk', are words which feature in none of the four official Swiss languages but which are comprehensible to all Swiss; they happen to be a sort of English. It's absolutely out of the question that 'risk' should be spelt r.i.s.q.u.e. - no no, it's r.i.s.k. And don't you believe that the CH on Swiss number plates stands for Confederation Helvetique, which is what everyone likes to think. Not a bit of it: it's Latin! It's Confederatio Helvetica! So educated Germans are usually happier to do business with you in English than in German.

Anyway, that's not what we were on about.

MM: No, quite. Shall we perhaps move on to Sudan?

BE: Shortly before the end of our posting in Bonn, we got booted out of Counsellor Row because I was only a First Secretary, and an incoming Counsellor who had no family at all said that it was beneath his dignity to live in the smaller house he was offered and he had to have the bigger house. The Ambassador (Jock Taylor by that stage) insisted on delivering the news to me himself, saying we were going to have to move to a smaller house. Before he did so, he actually got in touch with Personnel Department to find out that there was no immediate prospect of my having to move anyway on a posting, and he was duly assured that that was so. And so we moved to a very nice house where we were very happy and, two months later, we were told that oops! The Head of Chancery and Consul General in Khartoum had resigned and Basil Eastwood was the only person who could do this job, and he needed to get there within a month. It was nobody's fault, but it caused tremendous disruption all round.

Posting to Khartoum as Counsellor and Head of Chancery 1984

And my predecessor had indeed resigned; he left me a welcome note which said (curious phraseology), "This is not the armpit of the world, but you can see it from here." What I think he meant was that you could smell it! He had been there for only about six months; I think he did a one-year tour and then said, "That's it! I'm doing no more."

MM: He resigned from the Service?

BE: From the Service altogether! He couldn't take it. At that stage, the Office was on the fourth and fifth floors of a smart new building called Shell House which had been built for air-conditioning. The air-conditioning had broken down; it had lifts which didn't work; and it was just terribly scruffy and run down. We had proudly in the front waiting room a photograph of the front of the building at a period when the S had fallen off the building's name! It was 'hell House'.

Numairi (President of Sudan) had just declared Sharia Law and he'd suddenly got religion. Having, with great difficulty, negotiated a solution to the first civil war with the South, he soon set about almost deliberately making it inevitable that civil war would break out again. First of all, there was the declaration of Sharia Law throughout the country, in extreme form - you know, hand choppings, the lot, and certainly no alcohol and the Sudanese had been a very hard-drinking lot before. He also re-organised the way in which the South had been divided up. It all gets a bit complicated, but the dominant tribe in the South were the Dinka and the previous administrative arrangement ensured basically that the Dinka were in control. His new arrangement gave much more power to other groups in other areas, and the Dinka were very cheesed off. Anyway, trouble broke out, first in the Dinka and Nuer areas in Upper Nile Province and Bahr al-Ghazal. I was number two in the Embassy (and there were three different Ambassadors in my time, so I was the one element of continuity), and my time there was marked by milestone decisions that were made to recommend a withdrawal of all UK personnel from an ever-increasing area of Southern Sudan. By the time I left, we were hanging on by our fingertips to a small presence in Yei, close to the Congo border where we had an aid project, and in Juba, the capital of the little province of Equatoria. Those went shortly afterwards.

So that was part of my time there. Another feature of my time there was the famine. This was the time when famine and Bob Geldof were stalking the land first time round. We didn't quite know how to evaluate what we could vaguely appreciate was going on; we had no training, no wherewithal, no means to assess the seriousness of the situation. Although we had aid projects to improve the irrigation of the land along the Nile and various other projects around the place, we didn't have any guidance about evaluation and in a way, I have to say, didn't know what we would have done with such an assessment if we'd had it. The whole thing was driven by the media, as far as we were concerned at that stage. Suddenly we found that disaster relief was becoming a massive part of our task. It was fascinating; I was delighted to do it and we ended up funding the operation whereby Save the Children Fund, who themselves had had no previous experience of logistics on this scale, were distributing food throughout the whole of Darfur, which is an area the size of France. The food was actually supplied by

the Americans, and it was a hideously complicated process, politically very fraught. There was a point at which I remember going out there to go to see how our money was being spent and I came back and sent a telegram saying, "It's just not working. Save the Children have got to be told that they've got to bring people in who really know what they're doing." To their great credit, they actually brought in an old logistics specialist who knew about running vast trucking operations, and it worked; it was a success. They also needed political top cover because, if you are distributing food, you are deciding who is going to live and who is going to die, possibly. Save the Children quite rightly believed that they had to get the food out to the villages so that the villagers would stay there so that they would be in a position to plant the next year's crop. Otherwise they would be indefinitely dependent upon food aid. Fortunately there wasn't a security worry at that stage, so that was possible; that's the difference with what's happening now. It was politically very unwelcome to the Government of Sudan and the Governor of Darfur who wanted to have the food under his control so that he could distribute it where he thought it ought to go, above all in the towns, which would have had the effect of bringing everybody in from the countryside. And so we set up structures. There was a monthly co-ordinating meeting in Darfur which I used to fly out for. It was attended by the various agencies concerned, the Americans, ourselves, and Sudanese Government representatives. It was very nuanced affair you had to make sure that you got your way without actually making clear that it was what you wanted. At the same time, you had these massive influxes of refugees coming in from Chad to the West, where there was civil war and famine, and of course from Ethiopia and Eritrea where there was civil war and famine. And so you had these vast refugee camps being set up.

MM: Were they being set up in the countryside or adjacent to towns?

BE: They were mostly in areas that were reasonably accessible - nowhere was accessible in the far west, but along the Ethiopian border areas they were reasonably accessible to the one tarred road the country had, which was the one which ran from Port Sudan, round the edge of what you might call the Sown area and back up to Khartoum.

MM: Around which area?

BE: What I called the Sown - there's an area along the southern fringes of the Eastern Sudanese desert, and the camps were mostly there. It was not full desert; it was an area where rain-fed crops had been grown. And you had all the problems, which the world now understands much better, about dealing with refugees: vast numbers, inadequate sanitation, no political control. They were going

backwards and forwards across the border. What was the attitude of the Sudanese Government to the Eritrean Liberation Front and the TPLF, and the different Eritrean Fronts (you had the ELF and the EPLF, and you had politics going on within the camps). You had all sorts of different NGOs coming in there, and you had the good, the bad and some not so good in the middle. You also had this relationship between the NGOs and the media. If you were a BBC team wanting to come in and do a piece on famine or refugees, you did it in alliance with Oxfam who did extremely good work, and SCF who were doing wonderful work, and all these various aid organisations. It was to tremendous mutual benefit since you created a climate which obviously encouraged the donations flooding into these organisations. We saw this very clearly; you know, you'd have a piece on let us say Panorama one evening, and Linda Chalker, then ODA Minister, would stand up in Parliament the next day and say, "Yes, I was indeed most moved by what I saw on the television last night, and I have decided to give Save the Children an extra £3m for emergency relief. We were responsible for keeping an eye on what was going on. The money wasn't channelled through us.

MM: Was it channelled directly?

BE: To SCF in London. And then, in relation to the civil war in the South, a number of the NGOs were trying to get involved. It was extremely politically sensitive because food was part of the strategic game. We were arguing that the Sudanese Government ought to allow food to be taken in to Bahr al-Ghazal and so on; the Sudanese Government were adamant that it should not be allowed to go in there. It was very difficult. I mean NGOs are Non Governmental Organisations and extremely proud of their independence. We wanted to be helpful; they needed us, but didn't like to admit that they needed us as an Embassy very much. They were resistant to co-ordination; they all had their separate agendas; they wanted to maintain their own profiles, and their own fund-raising.

And then we helped found an informal arrangement where the UNICEF man, the USAID man, the IMF representative - because there was a major IMF problem going on at the same time - and one or two other key figures would meet quietly for a beer (which had to be quiet!) periodically in private houses. We also instituted, what was it called? an NGO Co-ordinating meeting which the Government came to as well. The NGOs were all invited and somebody gave what they thought was the latest situation report on the food supply situation or whatever it might be, and the NGOs were invited to speak. A lot of them did and it proved a very useful forum. It actually had to take place in a hotel because it was a very big meeting; NGOs were flooding in, some of whom knew very little about Sudan. That was a very interesting time.

During it, we moved from the old Embassy in 'Hell House' to a brand new Embassy, which was hopeless from a security point of view, but it had air-conditioning and it had fuel tanks, and it worked. It was just wonderful! The air-conditioning more or less worked! What was amazing was that we had our own fuel supply and we could actually run our own commissariat too, because less and less was available. We had a little swimming pool of our own too!

MM: Paradise! But I would have thought very necessary if you were dealing with all these NGOs; to have a suitable place where you could receive them.

BE: Oh yes, if they wanted to come and see you. The previous place was arguably one of the worst offices we had in the world. Indeed it was so argued!

MM: How about your relations with the Sudanese?

BE: We went through various stages. With the Numairi Government the relations got worse and worse. You then had a revolution and Numairi was thrown out, and Sadiq al-Mahdi came back - I can't honestly remember the sequence now. Sadiq - nice man! Western educated, a descendant of the original Mahdi and, as such, had a divine right to rule, in his own thinking, but frankly didn't know what to do with power when he got it. He was very happy to talk the talk about rescinding some of the laws and what was needed to try to end the civil war in the South, but didn't do enough and it didn't work. There were underlying tensions between his followers and those of the other great northern party, and it all ended up in tears. And then there was a military coup shortly after I left, actually, when the military became dominated by Islamic fundamentalists again. So you had a window of opportunity when you had relations that were very amicable with people who were not doing the things that were needed to save the country; and then things got worse again.

MM: The Southern population was predominantly Christian, weren't they?

BE: Christian or Animist. There was a lot of Animism of one sort or another but, how shall I put it?, one of the features of life, then as even more so now, was the fact that there was international Christian interest in what happened in Southern Sudan so that, in this country, the Bishop of Salisbury (Salisbury has a link with the Sudan) would organise great letter-writing campaigns to No 10 Downing

Street and so on. Nowadays this has gone even further with the Christian right being mobilised in the US; that didn't happen much in my day.

MM: So the relations are more difficult now than then?

BE: Well, I can't comment really. They've actually got an agreement with the South at the moment which has taken years of hard negotiation, with the British Government very much involved. And I hope to heaven it sticks, although it had been negotiated with John Garang who died in a 'plane crash very shortly after it was negotiated.

But they have worse problems now because of what's going on in the West with the Government in Khartoum who've totally alienated the Fur - the people of Darfur - who are Muslims, good Muslims, but they're not Arabs; they have a language of their own, culture of their own, and they are basically sedentary. We could talk about Sudanese politics for hours, but the Government used the nomads of the North as militias against the Southerners and therefore gave them free rein to do what they wanted, gave them the weapons they needed, and the increasing desertification with the Sahara moving south all the time meant that there was increasing pressure on grazing for their cattle. You had the Baggara, the cattle nomads, as well as the more settled populations; and between the camel nomads and the cattle nomads. You had an ecological disaster with political implications: competition for grazing, which was getting ever scarcer. The Government had thrown in its lot with the wildest of the elements in that particular drama.

MM: Sounds like a sad situation there.

BE: I'm not involved with Sudanese affairs at the moment, so I can't comment there.

We had three years there which I have to say were fascinating and very demanding - and actually quite happy. We had young kids and we used to go off camping in the desert, and we had a wind-surfer and used to go wind-surfing on the Nile; had a lovely time really, in many ways as a family. Then we went to Athens. This involved more upheaval of schooling; by that stage our two oldest girls were in UK boarding schools. Our two youngest girls had been at KIPS, the Khartoum International Preparatory School, which was the English school - quite a nice school which had been originally founded by the Church Missionaries' Society. By that stage, it was run by the 'mixed marriages' as we used to say; the Board was basically run by the husbands of English girls who'd married Sudanese. It had fallen

under the sway of a particular man who was, like Numairi, an Islamic fundamentalist. It was inevitable that we would quarrel. He was an Edinburgh-trained orthopaedic surgeon who supervised the hand choppings for Numairi and he was chairman of the governors of the British school! He used to inspect the sandwiches to make sure the kids weren't bringing ham to school for lunch. What happened was that I started asking questions about the school finances, which seemed a little opaque to put it mildly. Suddenly I received word at the beginning of the summer holidays after my family had all come back here, to Stonesfield where my parents were then living, to the effect that the governors had unanimously decided that I should be required to remove my children from the school forthwith. So these two little girls, after much humming and hawing and long-range communication, which wasn't easy in those days, were suddenly sat down to learn French because they were going into a little French school in Sudan. This they did. The elder of the two, however, was top of her class in everything in about six months so, after a year, we sent her back to prep school in England.

Posting to Athens as Counsellor (Commercial/Economic) 1987

We then got posted to Athens where there was a very nice English prep school, so we took her out of the prep school in England and sent her off to school in Athens. Schooling was a constant problem - I'm sure it features in many people's recollections. Our two youngest were therefore at the British Embassy preparatory school, St Catherine's it was called - is still called - in the northern suburbs of Athens.

Anyway, I was the number two in the Embassy in Athens. There were two counsellors in the Embassy; there was the Political Counsellor and I was the Economic and Commercial Counsellor. As such I was responsible for commercial promotion and for trying to deal with the problems - challenges - Greece had arising from the process of accession to the European Union and the opportunities that this opened up for British business. It was interesting work and I had to deal with the onshore Greek economy, which was sclerotic; state dominated, in bad need of the radical (?) cure which EU membership was going to produce - and also, with the totally different Piraeus economy, the offshore Greek economy, the economy of the Greek ship owners, who were totally used to dealing in a world market where cutthroat competition reined and who lived by their wits. And it was fascinating.

Anyway, I did that for four years. There were no particular highlights. I do have one rather vivid memory. Do you remember the Super-Gun Affair?

MM: Yes.

BE: Well, I was Chargé d’Affaires at the time when the British Government suddenly discovered in its wisdom that these great pipes, which had been declared as being for oil refineries, might actually be something to do with the construction of the super-gun. The wretched truck had left the shores of the UK and we suddenly got instructions to intercept this truck by one means or another, and stop it getting to Iraq! So I went in to see John Palaiocrassas, who was the Minister of Finance, and said, “Look! This is the situation; what can you do about it?” And he said, “Well, it’s all terribly difficult because it’s only stuff in transit. We can’t interfere. But I’ll see what I can do about it.” Anyway, he was very obliging. He discovered that these pipes had bills of lading which declared them to be for oil refinery use, and anybody could see that they didn’t look as if they were for an oil refinery. So the driver was arrested, and the truck was arrested. It was super! Then there was the most amazing stink with the British media saying, “Poor innocent truck driver who knew absolutely nothing about this!” And I then had to go in to see John Palaiocrassas again and say, “Thank you very much. It was absolutely super, but can you please let the driver out! He’s completely innocent in this.” He was pretty irritated but anyway, I think they managed - I can’t remember what actually happened at the end of the day.

We then had the great excitement of the first Iraq war over the invasion of Kuwait. Greece of course had its own internal terrorist threat with an organisation called November 17th, which believed that Americans and Brits and anybody who was anybody in Greece were legitimate targets. We also knew that Greece was a complete Tom Tiddlers ground for different Arab intelligence services, terrorist organisations and so on. We were all instructed to devise our own strategies to assess and deal with the personal threat to which we were exposed. David Miers was the Ambassador at the time. It was perfectly obvious to anybody that our house, along a narrow one-way street, was completely indefensible and that living in that house, even if we built a wall round it, I would be wide open to attack as I went to and from the office. And that was true in my case certainly; it was equally true of the Defence Attaché and the Political Counsellor. Anyway, David Miers said, “Well, as soon as the balloon looks as if it’s going up, you’d better move out and come and live in the Residence, which is next door to the office. Alison and I didn’t much like the sound of this. We’d nothing against the Miers but didn’t like the idea of being cooped up with colleagues twenty-four hours a day under these circumstances. We devised our own strategy: we moved out into what the Greeks call a garçonnière, a little flat maintained for dubious purposes by a friend of ours in a disreputable area off the back side of the Plaka - a notoriously communist area. Our friend gave out that he’d lent the place to some visiting

archaeologists, and we moved in there and tried to look as much like archaeologists as possible - we dressed drab and travelled by tram and so on; we had an absolutely super time. We had 'a good war' actually; we enjoyed it very much. And nothing happened.

The French did absolutely nothing by way of precautions; I think they had two cars that got blown up with nobody in them, and the Military Attaché's office got fire-bombed.

MM: When was our man kidnapped?

BE: Killed! Shot down! There were two murders. Shortly before we arrived: the British Council man had been murdered and the tragedy there was that he had recently bought the car of a colleague in the Embassy, and the theory was that they'd actually been gunning for the man from the Embassy rather than him. And then there was Brigadier Saunders who was assassinated much later on his way to the office.

MM: So a pretty unstable place in many ways! How on earth did they manage to meet the conditions for joining the Euro?

BE: I had left the country long before any decision on that was made. I'm loath to comment! Greek statistics, however, were always a bit suspect and how on earth Greece is going to maintain anything resembling the disciplines required in the light of the burden of debt that they've taken on because of the Olympics is quite another matter again. But anyway, they are members of the Euro.

Appointment as Director of Research and Analysis Department FCO, 1991

So, in 1991 we drove back across Europe from Athens to London on a home posting, as usual not knowing quite what job I was going to in London. We drove through Yugoslavia which was in the process of falling apart, so much so that we had to avoid Croatia and dodged into Hungary. After a month or two of leave, I was appointed Director of Research and Analysis which, in those days, was a unified Department with about eighty people, taking over much of the first and a good deal of the second floor of the Old Admiralty Building, and with a vast archive of files in the basement. I was answerable only to the PUS.

MM: Is that so?

BE: Yes, I had no boss apart from the PUS. But, on the other hand, I was acutely aware from the day I took over that this was a Department at risk from what you might call the march of events. It had been set up by Arnold Toynbee, in fact, during the War when he put Chatham House at the disposal of the Government, 'not to make policy but to supply the facts for those who do', his great phrase. It had, since then, become a vast reservoir of expertise about particularly the countries of the world. It was where our Kremlin watchers and the sinologists hung out; we had a team of I can't remember now how many people looking at different countries in Africa, Eastern Europe and so on. The basic idea was that, if you had to have in-house expertise, because you certainly couldn't go outside for it because of the culture of secrecy and so on. Voices were being raised saying that we ought to be entirely dissolved or that we didn't need such regional expertise, that history was over, and that all you needed to do was to ring people up and ask the facts of the situation if you needed them. There was all this expertise outside, and why were we going on paying for all this lot?

Anyway, I had a very interesting five years which was marked by a series of bureaucratic exercises to prove that, actually, in the new world disorder, expertise about countries was actually something that was going to become more necessary not less, particularly the more abstruse countries. I remember we had an attempt to prune our expertise on Africa so that we were able to concentrate only on those that actually mattered to us: Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda - there was a list of them. We were not to pay any attention to a number of minor and, to HMG, unimportant countries such as Rwanda and Burundi and so on; or indeed the Francophone countries in West Africa. Within weeks of that decision having been taken by the hierarchy, lo and behold you had the genocide starting in Rwanda; we were absolutely desperate for expertise on Rwanda. One of my people was actually whipped out to go and open an office there.

MM: Who?

BE: Lilian Wong. It became very clear that actually the nature of the diplomatic life was moving so fast that the practitioners, as it were, had less and less awareness of the background of the problems they were dealing with. This was absolutely vital when you were dealing with long-standing problems, but also when you were dealing with long-standing negotiations. One of the problems with Chris Patten and the negotiations with the Chinese over Hong Kong was that the Chinese had the same team doing all the negotiations and following up the Joint Declaration for years and years and years,

and we changed our people every two years and sometimes more often. People didn't really remember what had been said to the Chinese about X or Y, and it hadn't been properly recorded.

One of the other discoveries fairly early on in my time was that it was all very well for outsiders to come and say, "We don't need this expertise in house; we can get it outside if we need it." It's not so easy when you suddenly have a call to trot across to the Cabinet Office for a current intelligence group on West Africa which is meeting this afternoon. Equally, you can ask an academic to write you a nice, long-term think piece about this or that, but it's not going to be policy-relevant necessarily, and it certainly is not going to be delivered in a policy-relevant time-scale. So I found myself, for three years, fighting a series of bureaucratic battles to preserve, not just my particular Department but, as I saw it, the geographical expertise of the FCO itself. I felt, and feel, very strongly that, in the Whitehall battle for resources, the FCO is rarely going to be able to major on its particular expertise in global warming or one of these other major international issues, where another Department of State in London is the lead department; but what the FCO should be able to lead on is its knowledge of the international background of the countries concerned. We're rushing round the world faster and faster with less and less, as it were, inherited expertise, institutional memory if you will.

The single largest challenge was when Sherard Cowper-Coles, now the Ambassador in Saudi, was sent in to do a Cabinet Office scrutiny. Fortunately Sherard has a good sense of history and was easily persuaded that, in the new world disorder, what this Department represented was actually more important and not less. I remember John Boyd, who at that time was the Chief Clerk, subsequently told me that, "Ha! We thought we were actually going to be signing the death knell of the Department." But actually, what Sherard came up with was an endorsement of what I was already doing - opening a Department and bringing more people in from outside, becoming a sort of interface with academia, and mounting seminars and things for the Foreign Office, all of which was great fun incidentally - but he said, "There is a real crunch point coming up which Research Department cannot get away from, and that is that you're either going to move into the Foreign Office building after refurbishment is complete, or you're going to be left in outer darkness; which do you want? No two ways about it, they need to be in the building if they're to be relevant at all. OK? You want to be moved into the building; right you're going to have to slim down your archive massively, and start a massive weeding programme". Getting our research analysts to weed is a problem! And he also said, "To prove your continued relevance, what you're going to have to do is to be divided up and physically co-located next to the Departments that you are mainly dealing with."

So my hopes of moving half way through my time in London were kiboshed and I stayed with the Department, first to fight this assault as it was initially, and I said I couldn't leave the department at this juncture as it would be unfair; and secondly to implement the recommendations. This was difficult and painful. Actually the co-location physically took place just after I left, but a lot of the preparatory planning happened before that.

But it was not just a time of, as it were, bureaucratic battles but also a time of management of change, which I found fascinating. And also reviving the self-confidence of the Department, which would otherwise have been severely mauled by all that was going on, by showing them just how useful they could be to the Foreign Office. A classic example of this was when I organized one of the first of our major seminars. The first seminar was on Central Asia and was held in the India Office Council Chamber in late 1991. There were precious few people who knew anything about Central Asia at the time, and we got them all there. I remember going to the PUS's meeting the next morning and - I don't know if you know about the format of that meeting, but the people round the table have their say and then the people along the wall at the back, if they have any wit, keep it very short indeed. The further round the thing you go, the shorter you keep it, and I was right out at the end in an observing role. Anyway, it came to me and I said, "we did have this very interesting seminar yesterday about Central Asia." I didn't have to say more than that before an unholy battle took place, with the different AUs claiming that Central Asia was part of their command, with David Gore-Booth saying "one of the things that came out very clearly from this seminar was that it was actually part of the Middle East!"

We did a seminar in about 1992, on Islam and the West. This was even before Sam Huntington wrote his great article on the coming clashes of civilizations. We got a number of people in, including Ghazi Gosaibi, the Saudi Ambassador (he's now the Minister of Labour, a poet, a rather amusing bloke. He gave me a case of champagne for Christmas, which I felt I had to dish out round the Department!)

So organising seminars was one of the things that I enjoyed and it was part of the Foreign Office's new-found ability to welcome outside expertise when previously it had been turned in on itself by security concerns. Equally, I got the research analysts much more involved in international talks, and I went off and talked to people whom the Cabinet Office wouldn't have dreamt of talking to in terms of their ...

MM: Seniority?

BE: Well, not in terms of seniority, but the Cabinet Office only had talks when there was an established relationship at Cabinet Office level - ie not the individual services - and when it was really worth their while'. I went and did what they would have considered second-rank stuff and had research talks with the French and the Germans. The Cabinet Office still had intelligence concerns about talking to the Germans. My people would go in, not only to have the formal talks. When we went to Washington, for example, we would have our fairly formal talks with both the CIA and the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the State Department - but then the analysts would fan out and talk to people around town, to think tanks and so on. My basic remit to these people was, "I don't expect you to know everything about everything, but I do expect you to know who would know." It took them into very interesting nooks and crannies. We had talks in Moscow on our way through to talks in Tokyo, for example, and my colleague, Jim Hoare who subsequently ended up as Ambassador in Pyönyang in North Korea, discovered somebody in the Russian Academy of Sciences, who'd spent his whole career dealing with North Korea, either in North Korea or dealing with it in Party Headquarters in Moscow.

The Cabinet Office found it difficult to find time to have formal talks with the New Zealanders about major issues because for the Cabinet Office it seemed like all give and no take. We, on the other hand, were interested in finding out what they could tell us about Pacific affairs. Talking to them and to the Australians about South East Asia and the Pacific was very interesting and the Australians were particularly good on China.

So that was good fun, and I enjoyed it. And I was sad to leave; I'd made a lot of friends and ended up with an enormous respect for the slightly academic characters who were the research analysts.

MM: Greatly undervalued in the system, I think.

BE: Yes. David Gore-Booth used to refer to the Middle East Research Unit as his secret weapon. He really made use of it and I think nowadays they are much better used than they were. The danger is that, now that they're actually next door and also because, dare I say it, they haven't got quite the background that they used to have because we've brought in more people from outside on short term contracts and so on, they tend to be used as an extra pair of hands when there's a crisis on.

MM: So they get absorbed into the machine instead of being able to stand apart from it.

BE: But I think most of them are aware of this. I think it's a gradual process but I'm pretty sure it's happening.

MM: If anything, it's some slight consolation that you were five years in that job and therefore were able to gain a certain degree of depth yourself.

BE: Yes. In a way I had probably a better understanding than any Director of Research for a very long time of how the Department actually works and, as Director of Research, I attended the PUS's morning prayers on a very regular basis and therefore had a breadth of understanding of how the world was going, which was very interesting. All the discussions while Yugoslavia was falling apart, and were we going to recognise Croatia and all that sort of thing, all of that was being played out and I was, to a certain extent, a fly on the wall. So that was all very interesting.

One of the things I felt was that, to run research analysts, to have a certain amount of credibility with them, one had to have a field of expertise oneself. Rather by force majeure – our existing Islamic affairs expert resigned and I could not replace him - I made myself into - as it turned out eventually - the Foreign Office expert on this question of Islam and the West, which was a cloud not much bigger than a man's hand when I arrived and, by the time I left, was really quite a live issue and of course has gone on getting more and more so.

Appointment as ambassador in Damascus 1996-2000

So that was a good time. Then various jobs were mooted and I didn't get them and so on, and then Damascus came up; absolutely delighted - very good fit. We had a super time; I think the best posting we had in our careers. The house was nothing to write home about - it was a perfectly decent house, better than many ambassadorial residencies in Damascus, but it was not particularly wonderful. It had a tiny little swimming pool and I could do about three strokes each way and it was a joke really, and a very small garden, but I had a garden. A lot of ambassadors had to make do with flats; it just wasn't a town that had been geared up for dealing with diplomats.

The time I was there was interesting because it was the time of the declining years of Hafez al-Assad, the wily old fox of Damascus who had been playing Middle Eastern power politics, usually with a weak hand but playing that weak hand ruthlessly and skillfully since the mid-sixties. The Ba'ath party

took over in 1963 and he came out on top in 1964-66. But after the demise of what he used to call with a smile 'as-Sovietunion al-marhum' (the late-lamented Soviet Union), he had concluded that he needed the European Union as a counter-weight to the sole US super power in Middle Eastern affairs, and he also had concluded that he wanted better relations with the British because they had the best relations with Washington and, if he was ever to get back the Golan, which is the one thing he really wanted, it would have to be as a result of US pressure on Israel. I frankly can't dispute his logic. From that point, therefore, in an incompetent but definite way, there was an attempt by the Syrian Government, which is a most disagreeable government, to make itself agreeable to the Brits and the Europeans more generally. At the same time, the regime felt a degree of confidence in its dominance of the country and felt able to relax the controls. When I arrived there, if you wanted to have a conversation with the Syrians about anything interesting - and by that you normally meant "What's going to happen when the old man dies?" or policy to Israel - you first of all had to know your person very well and secondly you might want to walk down to the end of the garden to do it.

MM: So that it wasn't taped or ...

BE: So that it wasn't taped or whatever. By the time I left, you could have conversations on both those subjects across my dinner table with differing views expressed by differing Syrians in front of each other, which was extraordinary.

MM: That's a triumph!

BE: Yes, it was a triumph of diplomacy for us - it was frightfully nice for us to know that people could do that - but not only that; it was actually a reflection of the fact that the wind was blowing very strongly in that sort of direction. Hafez al-Assad was making a major effort in 1999 to clear the decks for his successor and so organising things that that successor could only be Bashar, his son. There was this business of persuading the Syrians and the Israelis to get into direct negotiations. It might be interesting to tell you it as I recollect the situation because I know a little bit about this.

We, the British, played quite a significant part in all this. The basic point is that I had the great advantage, at a time when the Foreign Office was actually sceptical about Syrian willingness to do a deal, that Michael Levy, Lord Levy, the Prime Minister's 'special envoy' to everywhere but, above all, a specialist fundraiser for the Labour Party who had strong connections with the Israeli Labour Party had also concluded, quite independently, that there was a deal to be done with the Syrians. The logic

of this was that only the Syrians could give the Israelis a trouble-free exit from South Lebanon (and Barak certainly needed to get his troops out of there), and that a deal with the Syrians would lend such momentum to the peace process in relation to the West Bank and Gaza that a deal, which then seemed impossible, might be more easily obtained. So, throughout 1999, there was a series of visits by Michael Levy to Damascus. The first time he came with one of the Special Advisers and I told him afterwards that it might be better if he came with somebody from the Political Department to act as his note-taker and his interface with the normal formal bureaucratic procedure. I'm glad to say he took my advice and did that subsequently because, otherwise, it would have put me in a very difficult position. As it was, he wanted to see every word that was going into my reports. I made it clear that I represented the Government and not just the Foreign Office, but he was not always inclined to see it that way.

MM: But he was well within the centre of government himself.

BE: Absolutely! He played tennis with Tony, as he tended to drop into the conversation repeatedly. But, his 'Tony and Me' line did reflect the fact that he was extremely well connected. He's a very interesting character, and Alison and I liked him and his wife Gilda who sometimes came with him. I think the old fox Hafez al-Assad had never seen anything quite like this. Michael made no secret of the fact, was proud of the fact, that he'd come from nowhere socially. He had no background in diplomacy; but he was well connected not only in government, not only within the Jewish community in London but also within the Israeli Labour hierarchy. His son Danny, in fact, was working at that stage for Yossi Beilin, who was still at that stage a key figure in the Labour Party hierarchy, and Michael and Gilda actually kept a house in Tel Aviv. What he was doing, in fact, when he came to talk to Hafez al-Assad was giving him briefings about how he, Michael, saw Israeli internal politics in relation to the peace process at the time. It's extraordinary how useful that must have been because I don't think Hafez trusted the intelligence he was getting from his own people - he didn't trust anybody!

It became clear that he, Assad, was prepared to do a deal so long as it could be presented as (and I choose my words carefully) an Israeli withdrawal to the lines of the beginning of June 1967, ie before the June War. There was a lot of haggling about whether Barak was prepared to give sufficient assurance for Assad that this was going to be the upshot for him to be prepared to go into direct negotiation. At the same time, Levy was explaining that, well no, he couldn't do that because it would be held against him in domestic politics. He would have given everything away before he started, etc.

We're talking now about November 1999 or early December. Michael Levy came through for yet another visit - and there had been debriefing to the Americans of what was going on and yes, something might be possible. We had a long and in the event decisive meeting with Hafez al-Assad who had the Foreign Minister with him, and then Michael and I went on to see Bashar as well (more to get the measure of the man at that stage than to do business). That all went on so long that the official dinner that had been laid on for us had to be cancelled. So Michael and I just went out to have supper down town. Michael was due to leave early the following morning. We were actually in the middle of our meal when we got summoned. The Syrians, who knew where everybody was all the time, got in touch with us and said, "Look, the Foreign Minister would like to see you now please."

So we finished the rest of our meal and went back to the Foreign Ministry where Farouq Sharah asked Michael basically to repeat what he'd learned from his meeting that morning with the President, where Farouq Sharah had been present. Sharah wanted to be absolutely clear that there was no misunderstanding. Fortunately Michael who wrote copious notes on tiny bits of paper was able to give a remarkably good account, scrupulously accurate, of what had happened. And Sharah said, "Thank you very much; I think that's right but these matters are so important we want to be sure. I hope you have a good trip home." "Yes, I'm leaving on the first 'plane tomorrow morning." "Oh, I'm not sure you ought to leave quite that soon." We were then summoned back to see Hafez al-Assad the next morning. What had happened? Hafez wanted to check himself that we had got it right; he too wanted to hear Michael's verbatim account of what had happened the previous day in the meeting.

Michael Levy repeated his account again and off we went, sent off telegrams all over the place. He had to travel back via Vienna and found himself on the same 'plane as Bashar al-Assad travelling incognito, probably to meet his future wife. He married a girl he had met in England. So Levy and Bashar wandered round the Duty Free in Vienna chatting. By this time, Michael, who's a very engaging personality, is a friend of the family! A man who was kissed warmly on both cheeks by Hafez al-Assad - a picture I will treasure in my memory!

A few days later, Madeleine Albright arrived. According to Dennis Ross they found 'the door unlocked', and made arrangements for the Syrians and the Israelis to meet at a country house conference complex outside Washington, called Shepherdstown, immediately after Christmas I think. I can't remember the precise date. We, of course, were not involved - sadly, I think, because we might have been able to avoid the Horlicks that then happened. Barak had given sufficient assurances for

Assad to believe, genuinely, that he understood that the outcome had to be presentable as withdrawal to the lines as they existed before June 1967.

The negotiations divided into different working groups, which were intended, so one assumed, to operate in parallel. The one group which the Syrians were interested in was called 'withdrawal', the timing, extent and so on. One was called 'security' and was to deal with the arrangements, above all for the listening posts on the top of the Golan but also for the areas from which the Israelis were to withdraw, the extent to which they were going to be demilitarised, and what were going to be the arrangements for supervising the demilitarisation and so on. One group was on 'peaceful relations'. Were you going to have diplomatic relations? Were you going to have open borders? What was going to be the situation? And one was on 'water', which was a hot issue since the Golan was a major source of water supply for the Jordan basin and the greater Israel.

All the groups met, but the Israelis didn't turn up for the first group at all for the first two days. The Syrians, having been assured the Israelis understood that the end result had to be total withdrawal, or something that could be presented as total withdrawal, negotiated in, I believe, good faith, and gave a great deal away so that, on security issues for example, the only outstanding point was whether the people who were going to man the listening stations on top of Mount Herman, from which you can actually look down into Damascus, whether those people were actually going to be Americans or Israelis. But whoever manned the stations, the 'take' would have been piped straight back down to Israel. All this sort of thing could have been fixed. The Syrian gave away a great deal on 'water', which was apparently quite a good discussion by water experts about how they were going solve this problem.

But the Israelis didn't turn up to the first group. Obviously Assad was far too ill to go so, Farouq Sharah was sent; a very exposed position on his own but with a good team to represent the Syrians, but the boss wasn't there, whereas the Israelis were represented by Barak. When the Israelis did turn up to the third group, I suppose it was the third day, they turned up without even a map. They were not serious. The Americans, by this stage, had got to the situation where they had actually drafted the outline agreement which incorporated all the agreements reached in the other groups. Things were going well except for the absence of progress in the first group. Farouq Sharah said, "I can't go on like this. We're going home. Tell the Israelis and Americans that, as soon as they're serious, we'll come back." And off he went, I think expecting to come back.

Unfortunately the Israelis leaked the draft agreement to the Israeli press to show just how clever they'd been and just how much they'd got. Again, this was perhaps required by their domestic political situation. They'd felt themselves politically exposed, but of course this was extremely short-sighted. None of the concessions that had been made had been cleared in advance with the Syrian Ba'ath Party and so on, and it was an over-simplification at best to think that Hafeez al-Assad or, still less, Farouq Sharah could just say yes and it would all go through like a dose of salts. So, as soon as that was leaked, it became impossible for the negotiations to resume. There was a subsequent lurch in early 2000. A meeting was set up in Geneva between Clinton and Assad - Assad didn't normally travel by that stage; he was a very old, very sick man - and the assumption amongst the Syrians present was that this was going to lead to resumption of negotiations. I was assured that the Syrian party went, with luggage so that they could, if necessary, go straight on to Washington to continue with negotiations.

That was as close as Syria and Israel have ever been to negotiation. I was not involved in the negotiation direct but with Michael Levy - I was basically supporting him in the talks, briefing him beforehand and writing the telegrams afterwards and so on - I was very involved in getting the Syrians up to that point, and was acutely frustrated that we didn't actually get anywhere.

We left Syria in I suppose about May, something like that, and we were off with our charity in Zambia in June.

MM: This is 2001?

BE: No, this is 2000. We were in Zambia when we heard that Hafeez al-Assad had died; he died just after I left, to my acute irritation. I would have loved to have been there since. Anyway!

MM: Before we leave Damascus, did the French have a large role to play there? What was their role in this attempt to bring about reconciliation or an agreement between the Syrians and the Israelis?

BE: None! The French have always had a soft spot towards Syria. In the days of the French mandate, Krak des Chevaliers, this wonderful crusader castle, was declared to be one of the monuments de France. On the other hand, their mandate period was not exactly happy; they bombarded Damascus twice and eventually had to be encouraged by the Brits to leave, after the War.

MM: Which war?

BE: The Second World War. The French had a sort of cultural effort towards the Syrians which we couldn't have dreamt of. They had a French Institute which was a source of expertise, not only on matters archaeological but Arab and Middle Eastern studies. The French Ambassador lived in a wonderful house, which had been the French High Commissioner's house. But they didn't have what the Syrians wanted at this juncture which was any leverage with the Americans or with the Israelis. They played no role whatever as France in any of this. There was a good deal of European Union activity going on at the same time led by Ambassador at Large, Moratinos, who is now the Spanish Foreign Minister, and the French were always keen to have the European Union role accentuated. We were in a slightly ambivalent (traditionally British!) position; that is that we were both in the European Union but also playing a separate game, because we were playing a game that was directly intended to try to draw the Americans in as opposed to just highlighting the European influence. No, it was a slightly difficult business to articulate the European Union policy towards what was going on, and they looked at us - quite rightly you might say - ('they', ie the French, Moratinos and others) with a certain amount of distrust as to what we were doing independently. What they were doing was useful stuff, but it wasn't actually on quite the same level of seriousness as what Michael Levy was doing. There we are!

MM: Very interesting! So that was the end of your fascinating period in Damascus.

Secondment to SOAS to establish the Middle East Institute

BE: We then came back and I had a gap. I'd had the usual problems of the jobs I really wanted and was qualified for in the Middle East being firmly occupied - Michael Boyce in Cairo for example; he then took early retirement shortly after I'd cast my hat elsewhere, but that's another matter. It was made very clear to me that I wasn't going to get Saudi, which I didn't want anyway. I was getting very snooty about the various other jobs in the Middle East for which I would have been well qualified.

Eventually we ended up getting the job in Berne but it wasn't until a year later. There was a gap of a year in fact. So I was seconded to the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University for the intervening period to help establish the London Middle East Institute, which was a very interesting time, again using my links with academia but also teaching me a lot about fund-raising. It was an interesting time but I don't think it's really relevant to this particular exercise.

Appointment as Ambassador in Berne, 2001

And then Switzerland in 2001, preceded by a period of trying to improve my French and get my German back up to snuff and so on. I delivered my credentials on 11 September, 2001 and the impact of 9/11 on matters like international banking played quite a major role thereafter. The Swiss were falling over themselves to show that they were going to be as helpful as anybody else, if not more so, in relation to these security threats and tracing terrorist money flows.

Why? Because there was another great battle looming on a different but very closely related front. This was the main feature of my time in Switzerland. It was something called the EU Savings Tax Directive. Stand by for a dose of EU theology!

Basically the European Finance Ministers, such as Hans Eichel in Germany and particularly Gordon Brown, were increasingly infuriated by what was known in the corridors of Whitehall as ‘the phenomenon of the German dentist’. By this was meant the highly paid European Union citizen who puts a fair proportion of his earnings into the back of his car in cash and drives it periodically over the border to deposit it in a bank, above all in Luxembourg but to some extent in Belgium, also in Switzerland, where he can be relatively sure that the fact that he has not paid any tax on this money will not come easily to light. So the European Union Finance Ministers had a massive internal battle trying to prevail upon the Luxemburgers and the Belgians and, to a lesser extent, the Austrians I think (it’s a bit before my time), to agree to an arrangement whereby the banks concerned would make available to the tax authorities in the member State government concerned details about the financial transactions of the citizens of that State - ie a Luxembourg bank would have to tell the German Finance Ministry about the dentist’s deposits. This was obviously something which the Luxemburgers and the Belgians felt very strongly about - they had a strong interest in this not happening! They reached a great compromise at a place called Feira in Portugal during the Portuguese presidency, called the Feira Compromise. Yes, they would do this basically when - I forget the phraseology now - ‘measures with similar effect came into effect or were introduced by other significant financial regimes’ ie before the EU would sort itself out, we had to get agreement - oh, and not only from the Swiss and the Lichtensteiners and Hong Kong, but also from the Channel Islands and the Cayman Islands and the Isle of Man and all these places. You can just imagine it!

Anyway, it was made very clear to me when I went out that nobody in the Foreign Office had any good idea as to what my role as Ambassador in Switzerland was to be but, when I went for a briefing in the Treasury, it was made perfectly clear to me that Gordon Brown knew exactly what my job was, and that was to make sure that I got the Swiss to agree to this.

This, of course, was absolutely anathema to the Swiss whose code of banking secrecy makes a very useful distinction between tax evasion, which is merely an administrative misdemeanour, and tax fraud which is a criminal offence but which has to involve the actual falsification of documentation. This means that if you just forget to file the fact that you've got so many hundreds of thousands of pounds tucked away in a Swiss bank account, that's not a criminal offence in Swiss law and therefore, under normal arrangements for judicial co-operation and so on, the Swiss would refuse to assist the criminal authorities, or indeed the tax authorities, in Britain or elsewhere.

Anyway, I had the great honour of being styled 'the spearhead of the EU attack on the Place Financière Suisse' by the Chairman of the Swiss Bankers' Association in a press briefing. I suddenly found myself being lambasted on the front pages of the newspapers. In effect I was making a lot of the running on this because there was no Commission representation in Switzerland for historical reasons, and because only towards the end of my time there were the Germans and the French really geared up to this as a major issue,. I decided that the only way to do this was actually to take quite a high profile line on it, and I remember - was it my first Christmas? I think it might have been - I was invited to go down to a gala ball by the British-Swiss Chamber of Commerce in Lugano. Lugano is in the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland which is entirely dependent - well, that's not quite fair, but it's heavily dependent upon its 'banking relationship' with clients who actually live in Italy. Anyway, I explained that "I'm afraid you should be prepared for the fact that this distinction between tax evasion and tax fraud is something that is going to come increasingly into the public forum. It may make perfect sense to any Swiss who's been brought up with it and, since Swiss are very law-abiding people, it makes no practical difference to them. The distinction, however, will be greeted with complete incomprehension outside Switzerland and will be seen as a licence to 'forget' for those who prefer that some of their income should not be declared subject to tax." It went down like a lead balloon, as you can imagine. It was intended to do. It was all great fun.

Anyway, we argued the toss round and round and round, and eventually we ended up with a murky European-style compromise. Gordon Brown declared himself happy. This was only just before I left so this issue was a dominant theme for most of my time there.

And then we did a whole lot of other things like trying to show that we loved the Swiss in all sorts of other ways and wanted to co-operate with them, which indeed we did. But, the Swiss themselves decided, how shall I put it, that their strategic posture no longer made much sense. The Swiss strategic doctrine was that a Nazi armoured thrust through what they call the Mittelland - the strip of fairly easily negotiable country running from Zurich down to Geneva - should be made so punishing for the Nazis, the Germans, that they wouldn't want to try it, and the Swiss would anyway return to their mountain redoubts. They had whole mountains hollowed out and reinforced as vast bunkers so that no-one would take it on. And this had been adapted as a philosophy to deal with the Soviet threat. By the time I got there they were concluding their military thinking didn't actually make a lot of sense in a post-Soviet world, where the threats to Swiss security were actually going to come from problems on the ground in former Yugoslavia or elsewhere in Eastern Europe and that actually, while preserving their neutrality, what they needed to do was to co-operate as best as they conceivably could in preserving a wider European security. This was admirable stuff and, since the Swiss have money and resources, we have a major interest in persuading them to work with us. They were happy to do so, while being very hemmed in by the fact that they couldn't be too public about what they were doing. They were trying to make sure that they had inter-operability with NATO communication systems and so on.

And so there was some interesting work to be done on that side but I had the great frustration of hearing almost simultaneously that my Defence Attaché was being cut and please could I go in and persuade the Swiss to lend us some helicopters for use in support of the British troops in Bosnia. Anyway, so my Defence Attaché was being cut and yes, the Swiss did lend us the helicopters. This was because different parts of the MOD were operating according to different criteria.

In some ways, Switzerland ended my career on a bit of a down beat note. But I enjoyed Switzerland - it is a fascinating country. Alison enjoyed it rather less, I think, because she hankered for the situation we had back in Damascus, but it was good.

MM: Well, in a way they were being kind, I suppose, by giving you a nice European posting at the end of your career.

BE: I'm sure that's what they thought, and I'm sure I ought to have regarded it as such. Frankly I was jolly lucky to get it, because I was only there for two and a half years by the time I got there.

When it came to the point, there was no question whatever, despite the fact that the retirement age was extended. “No no, you couldn’t possibly stay on. You’ve got to let somebody else in there.”

Cecily's Fund and aid for Zambia

MM: Well, before we finish, I know that, in retirement, you’ve been very closely involved with Cecily’s Fund. Would you like to say a word about that because I think it’s got a foreign policy aspect to it insofar as it’s concerning aid to people in Zambia.

BE: Right, OK. Well, for new readers, a bit of background:

While we were in Damascus, my third daughter, Cecily, was doing her gap year before going up to Cambridge, working in Kitwe, the capital of the copper belt in Zambia. In the mornings she was teaching her local school and in the afternoons she was helping out in a local organisation looking after AIDS orphans; this was not an orphanage because there are far too many orphans for that to be a practical solution. There are now in Zambia there are 1.1m orphans out of a total population of 10.8m. Just awful.

Anyway, tragically Cecily was killed in a car crash in Zambia in 1997, shortly before the end of her time there. £6,500 was donated at her funeral - some of it by people who didn’t know us or her but who had seen the notification in the newspapers, “No flowers please; donations to AIDS orphans in Zambia”. We sent it all out to the organisation she had been working with. And then, in January 1998, Alison and I went out to see what they’d done with it, and found they’d used it to put most of the children on their books who were of school age into primary school. We said, “Well, what about next year?” and they said, “We don’t know.” And so Alison and I took a deep breath, looked at each other and said, “OK, we’ll fix it.” And we came back and founded Cecily’s Fund as a UK charity in September 1998, fifteen months after Cecily died. It takes some time to do these things. We are basically now in the situation where we finance the education budget of the organisation that she had been working with, which now has 12,000 plus children on its books, of whom 9,500 plus are in school thanks to the money that we send them every year. And we also have about 600 children who go to school outside Lusaka in a squatter township where we basically pay for the teachers and school books and so on. We do various other small things but the main thing is still this big project. We now make it possible for 10,000 Zambian AIDS orphans to go to school.

Somehow we managed to get this thing set up and running while we were still in harness. I used to reckon I did the management of Cecily's Fund between 6.00 and 8.00am every morning while we were in Berne. It was much more difficult when we were in Damascus, I may say, where communications were terrible. This organisation is small but growing very rapidly. It presses many of the right buttons; it's AIDS, it's education, it's children and it has the secret ingredient and that is that it's accountable. We place tremendous importance on ensuring that we really do know where the money is going; we know the names of the children we're educating, we have the books of our partner organisations audited in Kitwe by Price Waterhouse Coopers. We go out there and we check everything. And it's growing at a most amazing rate. I think our budget last year was £250,000; this year it's going to be £360,000 odd, and it's going on up, not only because numbers are increasing and Zambian inflation, but also because the children are going up through the school system and, whereas primary education, supposedly free, is very cheap, secondary education costs a lot more. And so the cost per child is going up all the time.

Somehow we have managed to combine this with a diplomatic career. It's actually, I think, stood us in very good stead; from many of the things we want to do now we've made friends and contacts all over the world who support us in what we're now doing. Many colleagues in the Service, but many outside the Service too, are people whom we have come across at one point or another. Friends from Shell in Syria, for example, still support us regularly. One is now in Sakhalin in the far east of Russia. So it's a small local charity, based very much here in Oxfordshire, with a very international outlook. But it's operating entirely with and through Zambian organisations to deal with a problem which, we feel very strongly, has been largely ignored by the international community. With all the emphasis on the need to do something about AIDS, a great deal of money has been spent on therapy but almost nothing on the living victims who are the orphans who are left.

So that's what, as it were, gives meaning to my retirement.

MM: Thank you very much indeed for that.

Transcribed by Joanna Buckley, October 2005