

## **BDOHP Interview Index and Biographical Details**

**LAING, (John) Stuart, born 22 July 1948, son of Dr Denys Laing and Dr Judy Laing, née Dods; married 12 August 1972 Sibella, daughter of Sir Maurice Henry Dorman, one son two daughters.**

Biographical Details with (on right) relevant pages in the interview:

Entered Diplomatic Service, 1970	pp 2-3
FO, Desk Officer for Nepal, Sept 1970-July 1971	pp 3-6
Arabic training, MECAS, Sept 1971-Jan 1973	pp 6-10
British Embassy Jedda, Jan 1973-May 1975	pp 10-20
UK REP Brussels, July 1975-78	pp 20-24
FCO London, Desk officer for Germany (WED), Maritime delimitation (MAED), Namibia (SAfrD), May 1978-83	pp 24-32
Head of Chancery, Cairo, 1983-87	pp 32-35
Deputy Head of Near East and North African Department, 1987-89	pp 35-39
Czech language training, 1989	p 39
Counsellor, Prague, Nov 1989 - April 1992	pp 40-44
Deputy Head of Mission and Consul-General, Riyadh, 1992-95	pp 44-52
Head of Know-How Fund for Central Europe, 1995-98	pp 52-56
High Commissioner, Brunei, 1998-2002	pp 56-64
Ambassador to Oman, 2002-05	pp 65-77
Ambassador to Kuwait, 2005-08	pp 78-85
<i>Reflections on the Diplomatic Service.</i>	pp 85-87

## **BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME**

### **RECOLLECTIONS OF STUART LAING MA MPhil RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY MOIRA GOLDSTAUB**

MG: It's 15<sup>th</sup> March 2018 and Moira Goldstaub is in conversation with Stuart Laing about his recollections of the Diplomatic Service. Can we start with very general questions about your educational background and how you came to join the Service?

SL: Yes. Well, I had a very standard private education. I went to Rugby School and came not quite directly to Cambridge because I was sort of forced through education rather fast at school and did my A-Levels very young, and my parents and I thought it would be a good idea to do something before coming to Cambridge, so I did VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) in India as a teacher for a year when I was 17. So I came to Cambridge when I was just 18. I did Classics. In those days, and it's still more or less the same, the Classics degree was fairly general in Part 1, for the first two years that is: we did Literature, Language, History and Philosophy, and in Part 2 I specialised in the Philosophy option, mainly doing Plato and Aristotle. I took the entrance to the FCO during my last year at Cambridge.

MG: Why did you select that as your career path?

SL: Well, that was why I mentioned the India thing, I think it was because of having spent a year abroad. I was interested in working for the British, either public sector or private sector, but with an overseas element to it and I remember thinking at the time and explaining in interviews, all the things that I was applying for had a strong overseas element in them.

MG: So what was the selection process? Was it very difficult? They don't take many people so it's quite challenging, I imagine.

SL: Yes, but I'm always a bit sceptical about people who say things are very difficult, although, come to think of it, actually looking back on my own experience, I think I was interested in the challenge, that's to say interested in whether I could beat those statistics because it is true, I can't remember what the figures were at that time but anyway it was well-known among us third-year students that the FO exams were statistically against you. I'm

trying to avoid using the word 'difficult' because I don't believe that most employers choose just the best, what they choose is the best fit and I think, and I hope, that the FO was doing that in its interview process. So, a lot of us thought that it was a bit chancy. I had a very good friend, a kind of cousin by marriage, who took the FO exams and didn't get through the first stage which was just a written exam, and he went on to have a perfectly decent career somewhere else. So I don't think it was necessarily chancy but the process was trying to identify those people who would fit well in the system. Now, I know there's been quite a lot of criticism, not recently but about ten years ago, there was a review done of the FO – and Civil Service in general – the FO application system, and the reviewers took exactly this line of criticism, which is 'ok, so, what we've got is a system where the employer is simply trying to find clones for himself, for themselves, in the people that they take in.' And I suppose there may have been something in that, but I like to think that it was a bit more objective and what they were trying to do was say 'we are trying to identify those people who can at minimum reach the grade of what was then called Counsellor in their early 40s and go on to take leadership of the Service later on.' So they were claiming at any rate to identify future leaders. And what was the process? Well, I think you probably have all that on paper. We had a written exam, we then had this two-day series of tests and interviews, which by the time I took it, which was early 1970, was no longer the residential thing but just popping down to London for these tests and interviews and then the Final Selection Board, which is about a 45-minute interview.

### **FO, Desk Officer for Nepal, Sept 1970 – July 1971**

MG: You were successful and from the notes you've given me, you started in September 1970 as a Desk Officer for Nepal. So, I'd like to hear about your first day and the sort of ambience, what it was like: you've referred to coal fires being removed and the tea trolley.

SL: They'd just abolished the coal fires and put in central heating, but only a year before: it was still just in recent memory. But the tea trolley continued, that is to say, at about 4 o'clock, there'd be a rattle down the corridor and somebody would come over with a cup of tea for all the officers. I went in, and worked in a Third Room.

MG: What does that mean?

SL: The First Room was the Head of Department, the Second Room was the Deputy Head of Department, who was also not called that, but was called an Assistant, and then the Third Room was occupied by people of the grade of First, Second, or Third Secretary, who were the Desk Officers. So I was appointed as Third Secretary. Every Department – mine was the South Asian Department – had a Head of Department, who might have been – well, it was a Counsellor grade – might have done a junior Ambassadorial job but would expect to go on to be an Ambassador immediately afterwards, and an Assistant who was a very senior First Secretary, and then us types in the Third Room. And my Third Room consisted of a Desk Officer for India (Political) and a Desk Officer for India (Economic) and myself doing Nepal, and I thought this was quite fun, you know, to have right at the start with no experience at all, yet to have a responsibility for Britain's bilateral relations with a country, even one as small as Nepal, and there were interests mainly to do with Gurkhas that we needed to keep an eye on. But basically there was not really enough to do. I'll come back to that in a minute.

There was one task which I did have to do, which was really quite interesting, which was that we were at the time preparing papers for publication relating to the process leading up to the Independence and the Partition of India. That was 1947 and so this was less than 30 years earlier, ahead of the 30-year rule, I suppose. We were publishing papers called 'Transfer of Power', you can probably find them if you look them up in, they must have been published in the early 70s. And my job, I mean this was something that the other two Desk Officers didn't have time to do, and so they wanted a junior person to check them over for questions of political sensitivity so that effectively we could cut out those bits which were of continuing political sensitivity. So I read pages and pages of these Transfer of Power documents, which was interesting. And the other atmospheric thing worth passing on - the other thing which I remember being astonished or surprised by – was the kind of deference actually paid to me, a person of no experience, by people who were considerably my senior in age but were junior in rank. I mean, the Service still in a sense operated a little bit, I won't say *like* the Armed Forces but reflecting some of the ideas of the Armed Services in terms of rank and promotion. You would definitely get promoted from Third Secretary to Second Secretary, and Second Secretary to First Secretary, and First Secretary to Counsellor, and I think you could find Tables which suggested what rank these equated to in the Armed Services. So I was technically in there as a Third Secretary, equivalent to, I don't know, Second Lieutenant, or whatever it is. So the NCOs as it were, who were the clerical staff, the people running the registry, the paperwork, behaved as NCOs do to young officers. I asked for a file, a chap - it

was in my case a male, they weren't all men - would come along the corridor: I'd ring him up or perhaps I'd go along, and say 'I think I need to see such-and-such a file' or 'a letter has arrived from the ambassador in Kathmandu and I need to see the previous papers, please put it on file and bring it along' and so a quarter of an hour later he would trot along the corridor with the files tied up beautifully in red tape.

MG: Oh it was red tape?

SL: Well, pink, maybe it had been red earlier on but it was definitely pink by the time it came to me. We had sort of off-red, pink, tape. Here's some, look. A piece that I seem to have brought with me. And would reverently put it on my desk and say 'here you are, sir.' And I did find this a bit odd actually.

MG: And you're telling me that there was no chance that the Registry Clerk could ever become a Third Secretary?

SL: No, no, absolutely not. They had a different career path. And we had this system. I mean, this will be, I suppose, a paragraph the historians won't be interested in because they will see it on the paperwork ... so in comes, as I say, the ambassador or someone in the Embassy in Kathmandu writes a letter, a bag arrives - you know, we had all this stuff about the bag, other people have told you this - the bag comes in and is distributed round and so you open the letters and then we had ... if the thing was just for my information, you would write R and PA on it, meaning 'Register - put it on file' and 'PA - put it away'. Sometimes you'd write R and R, meaning there was more work to do on it - 'Register and Return.' And sometimes of course you would circulate it to ... there was virtually no photocopying, photocopying was considered a very extravagant, expensive, thing to do. So you didn't take copies of stuff unless you really had to and copies were very bad. And so if other people need to see it, including Undersecretaries, you would mark it up to the Head of Department and the Undersecretary with a comment or not.

MG: What about the relationship between Nepal and India? I looked it up and the main thing was that there was a bit of a trade impasse at that stage because India was so much bigger and wanted to dictate what was happening with Nepal. But was Britain involved in anything like that?

SL: It does ring a bell, but I can't really remember. Yes, I think we were conscious of a risk that India would bully, frankly, bully Nepal and we wanted to not exactly act as a protector for Nepal - you know, it was a sovereign state - but make sure that there was some kind of fair play. I think there was a bit of that, but I'm afraid I can't put my finger on it.

MG: I'm very hazy about what China was doing, but China hasn't had a very good relationship with Nepal, has it?

SL: No, but that again wasn't really playing out then. The big political issues, as I recall, that we were dealing with then were: the question of Gurkhas, Gurkhas' pensions, and whether we were going to continue to pay them to widows and then widows' dependants – “twice passed on”, as it was termed.

MG: You were there for only a few months, and then you were sent ...

SL: No, no, pretty well a year.

### **Arabic training MECAS, Sept 1971 – Jan 1973**

MG: Yes, just under, sorry, yes – July '71. And then you went in September to do an Arabic course at this place called MECAS. I've been told that it was something to do with spies and George Blake went there, I'm sure that wasn't the case, but ...

SL: This is all very well-documented, everyone knows about this. First of all, I'll just say a little bit about the recruitment process for MECAS. As you say, this place called MECAS, actually, among the Arabists, it's incredibly well-known, everybody knows about MECAS and the village where it was, Shemlan, and somewhere on the shelves there there's a history of MECAS, which we could get down. It's all very well-known among those who know anything about the Middle East. So at that time, of course we didn't have processes of application for jobs and at that time the Personnel Department would, midway through that first year, sift through the new entrants and decide how to allocate some of them for hard language training and some of them not.

So first of all we did a Language Aptitude Test. I think they still have something quite similar, because obviously you don't want to send people off to do Japanese, Chinese or Arabic if they don't have a natural aptitude for languages, hard languages, you're just wasting everybody's time and demotivating them and so on. So they had an aptitude test which was based partly on writing and partly on aural, hearing test, and I did quite well on that. I thought that was simply because I was a keen musician with good hearing and I had done Classics and so I had quite a good sense of language. So they said 'would you like to do a hard language?' as a result of that aptitude test and I said, 'yes, I would,' and an interview then took place, lasting I should think about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, in which we went through the options with this wonderful woman called Ma Barraclough, Mrs Barraclough, but we called her Ma Barraclough because she mothered the new entrants, I can't remember what her real first name was. So Ma Barraclough interviewed me and she said 'well, what language would you like to do?' I said, 'Persian.' I had romantic ideas of reading the poems of Hafiz, rose gardens and so on ... She said 'well we've already chosen our Persian speaker ...' they only had one a year, 'we've chosen him, what about Arabic, we're short of Arabic volunteers for the programme, the Arabic programme.' I asked, 'what's the deal?' They said, 'well, you go to this institute in Shemlanin Lebanon, near Beirut, and you become a student for a year.' I said, 'well that sounds pretty agreeable, I think I'll do that,' not realising, I'm afraid, in the way that young people don't, the long-term implications for my career because Arabic is different from any other language because – I don't mean linguistically, obviously it's different – but I meant in terms of its career implications because we have, I think, it's 21 when I last counted, missions between Morocco in the West and Muscat in the East, in all of which we – the FO - need Arabic speakers. And so, whereas if you do Japanese, I'm exaggerating a bit but not much, if you learn Japanese, you will spend a year and a half or two years learning Japanese, you will then serve as a junior officer in the Embassy in Tokyo, or possibly the Consulate-General in Osaka, that's all we've got, you might almost certainly go back in mid-career, and then you might become Ambassador but you might end up by having only two postings with your language skills. If you do Arabic, you're almost bound to be posted back to the Middle East, I won't say time and time again, but anyway quite often and that's indeed what happened to me. I had five postings in the Middle East: twice in Saudi Arabia, once in Cairo, then Ambassador in Oman and Ambassador in Kuwait. So the FO really does make use of its Arabists in a way that it doesn't for other languages, so by agreeing to do the Arabic programme, I was committing

myself, although I didn't quite realise it, to a career that would be hugely coloured by the Middle East.

MG: So that was felicitous, wouldn't you say?

SL: Well, it worked out well for me. I was very happy with it and I was also extremely fortunate in that it worked out well for my wife because of course we weren't married. My girlfriend at the time, now my wife, and I had no idea at all whether she would take to the Arab world, but luckily she did because it's pretty miserable if you have a marital partner or any kind of partner with whom your language specialisation doesn't fit, especially if it's Arabic. If it's something else, then as I say, you can probably build a career that involves different postings but if you're an Arabist you're going to be - I won't say stuck, stuck with the Middle East - but you're going to be strongest in your applications for Middle Eastern jobs.

MG: I suppose that the different countries in the Middle East have different attitudes to women and what women can do, don't they? So that could be a problem.

SL: Yes. For some people, that is a problem. And of course we were, as I say, twice in Saudi Arabia which is the most extreme in that regard. But, for people of a certain disposition, and luckily, as I say, my wife is one, you can get round it, you can find ways of enjoying yourself and having a rewarding and interesting, profitable, useful existence even though you're living in a country which makes life difficult for women in all sorts of ways.

MG: Well maybe you'll touch on that when we get to the postings because that would be very interesting and I think quite important.

SL: Yes.

MG: So going back to MECAS, could you paint me a picture of what it was like? How you got there and so on?

SL: Yes. MECAS was an institute in a little village just above Beirut, very sensible by the way not to be in Beirut because we were near enough to Beirut to be able to get down to

enjoy it if we really wanted to but it was a tricky drive of 40-45 minutes and so we were far enough away to be able to concentrate on our studies. And so we really did, we worked pretty hard and it was a very, very effective, quite traditional method of teaching. Day one, we were presented with a book – it's up there on the bookshelf – with the alphabet on page 1, they said, 'go home and do this, we'll have hardly any lessons today, please go home and go back to your rooms and learn the alphabet.' I mean the script. So that's how we learnt Arabic and it was done in an extremely competent way, with a combination of British but mainly Arab, mainly Palestinian actually because the school had started life in 1948 in Jerusalem, teachers. And it taught us very good Arabic.

MG: How many variations of Arabic are there?

SL: I could talk about this at great length, but it's not I think really relevant to this. The answer is we learnt a language called Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), we also learnt Lebanese Colloquial and we adapted the MSA to the colloquial where we needed it in the places where we served. So the colloquial in, for example, Lebanon or Egypt is very different, really has quite a lot of different features that differ from MSA, whereas in the Gulf, and especially in Saudi Arabia, the language that they speak is much closer to MSA, and speaking MSA, as I did, on the streets of Cairo, sounded slightly ludicrous to the cabbage-seller, but is comprehensible. It's the language that people use on formal occasions, on radio, television, conferences, any formal occasion. Even Arabs who speak their own colloquial at home will speak MSA on most formal occasions. And you talked about spies, yes, the Arabs, many Arabs actually call MECAS *madrasat al-jawasees*, meaning 'The School of Spies', 'Spy School', and they do so because Blake but also Philby, I don't think Maclean, but anyway two at least of the famous spies attended the school in the 50s, 60s and so this got it branded. So in lots of places I went to later in my career, Arabs would nudge me and wink and laugh and say, 'oh, so you were at the spy school.' At the school, or institute, the largest single group were FO, and then there were quite a lot of people from outside, that's to say either other foreign services, we had two from the German Foreign Office, there was a Swiss, there was a Japanese, who has stayed a good friend of ours in later years, and there were some from the commercial sector, notably the British Bank of the Middle East, which was later bought up by HSBC. So we all muddled in together.

MG: So it was really quite a melting pot of different people? I understand it was set up by the British Army after the Second World War, originally in Jerusalem, wasn't it? So presumably...

SL: Oh yes, sorry, I forgot. Yes, we also had people from, not a very large number, we had some from the British Armed Services.

MG: So you still had Forces people there?

SL: Yes, but not very many. And then it moved, and it was open to other nationalities as well, and commercial as well as governmental personnel.

MG: And I take it that you went there as a bachelor?

SL: Yes, we were married halfway through the course.

MG: Right. And did your wife join you there then after that?

SL: Yes. And we worked mostly in what were called syndicates, which were small groups of four and the deal was that spouses of FO students - this actually always meant wives, because there weren't any female FO students - could join the course provided they didn't add to the number of syndicates. So provided there was no marginal, additional cost, the FO would allow wives to participate in the course. In my time, two or three of them did and some of them were very good, in fact there was one case where the wife was achieving higher marks than the husband but again, I won't mention any names!

### **British Embassy Jedda, Jan 1973-May 1975**

MG: No, best not! So, when that finished, were you given a choice of what to do or were you just automatically sent to Jedda?

SL: No, these were the days where the Personnel Department sent you. In fact, what happened in our case was - I only discovered this later - the Ambassador in Saudi Arabia, in Jedda, who was Alan Rothnie, came on a talent-spotting expedition, he came to MECAS and

must have had supper with us or something, I don't remember it, and looked around the people and thought that he'd like me, so he then spoke to the Personnel Department and they said, 'will you go to Jedda?' so we said 'fine.' I say 'we', because I remember that Sibella came with me to the Personnel Department for the interview where they told me that I was going to Jedda and they were kind enough to – who was it? Was it Juliet Campbell? Can't remember who it was – anyway, this person in the Personnel Department was kind enough to say to me 'do you want to go?' and then turn to Sibella and say, 'and what do you think about going to Saudi Arabia?' Well, we were both pretty ignorant, so we said 'fine, we'll go together.'

MG: We're in January '73 and you're going to Saudi Arabia. What did you find when you got there?

SL: Saudi Arabia was an extraordinary country at the time. I'll just mention one detail which is quite interesting, which was that we drove there. So we drove from Beirut east to Damascus, south to Jordan, through Amman, we stayed in Petra, then we crossed the Saudi border, camped on the side of the road, spent the night, just pitched our tent at the side of the road in the desert just inside northern Saudi Arabia, distances are huge as you can probably imagine, then it's pretty well a day's drive from there to Medina, you can't go into Medina as a non-resident, so we took the bypass to Medina down to the coast and then down into Jedda. Someone must have met us in Jedda to take us to our house, but I can't remember that detail.

MG: It sounds a silly question, but if it was a developing country, and I have some knowledge of the roads in other Arab countries round that time, where were the filling stations and things like that? What did you do?

SL: Well, the roads were pretty basic, but adequate. Petrol stations were far apart, so you had to be careful not to run low. And there were very simple cafés where you buy a coke or coffee.

MG: So you said they took you to your house. What was that like? Your first overseas posting, I want to know what the accommodation was like and the staff.

SL: Well, to be honest, we felt very spoilt. Sorry I'd just better be a bit more precise about 'developing country', I mean, this sounds a bit patronising, I don't ... well, it's true in the literal use of the word. In lots of ways life was quite basic. There was a supermarket where we could do our shopping but you could easily go down to the supermarket to do shopping and find there weren't any potatoes because the lorry that brought potatoes from Jordan just hadn't arrived and life was quite simple in lots of ways. Well, obviously countries develop, I'm talking about fifty years ago, aren't I? Very nearly, yes, 45 years ago, the early '70s. Oil was \$1.50 a barrel, there was a US Ambassador there called Jim Aikens, who gave a speech, a public speech in which he said, as a kind of warning to the world, 'you watch it, world, oil could rise to \$5 a barrel,' and everyone said 'Jim has finally flipped.' The Saudis had considerable surpluses, even at \$1.50 a barrel, because the cost of production was so low, but what they needed was help in developing the country. The Health and Education and other basic services were really very rudimentary and we invented something which we called 'Pay TA', TA standing for technical assistance. We devised a kind of scheme under which the Saudis could buy from us the technical assistance of the kind we were giving to genuine developing countries in Africa, for example, so that they would take the same expertise from us but pay for it. An extraordinary concept, if you think about it. I haven't seen any documentation about it since, probably Saudi pride would prevent anyone from publishing, but that's what we did. I remember, for example, the Saudis wanted to do a census, very sensible, you know they didn't know how many people they had, I think it was the first one they'd ever done, and they came across the problem of how to take a census of people who are nomads, who live in desert areas. Anyway, it so happened that the British ODA, Overseas Development Administration, had experience of this because we had ex-colonies, or Commonwealth countries, or even non-Commonwealth countries where there were deserts and nomads and people wanted to do censuses. So we had this expert, who was the world expert in doing censuses in desert places, and we arranged for him to come out and he gave advice to the Saudis and the Saudis paid us his cost, but it was all done as if it were a developing country aid project. I mean, it was mini, tiny, but we did have other bigger ones as well. So that's what I mean by saying it was a developing country, they didn't have this expertise, they didn't have the way to access it except through the kind of machinery that we used in other countries. Anyway, all that changed, I mean, so it was the beginning of 1973 and there was the 1973 war, then there was the OPEC oil cartel, Sheikh Yamani, all that and oil at \$12 by the end of 1973, \$25 a barrel a year later.

MG: There seemed, in another conversation I had, to be a misunderstanding about whether there would actually have been at that time an oil shortage or whether it would merely be, I say merely, a question of the price rising and the person I was interviewing was saying that, as the extraction was done by different companies and therefore there was no question that the oil-producing countries were simply going to pull the plug because the oil was coming in to, say, Royal Dutch Shell and places like that, but that they could be charging more for the use of this and the exporting of it. He was saying how he spent ages trying to explain to the government that there wasn't going to be a shortage and there didn't need to be rationing although the government in Britain was printing ration books and so on, and I'd like to hear your view of that from the insider's point of view, the expert's point of view, being there, because of course he wasn't there, he was in London at the time. Would you agree with that?

SL: Not entirely. I mean, certainly, again, my memory of this is pretty faint, but I thought that at one point OPEC, or OAPEC – that's the Organisation of *Arab* Petroleum Exporting Countries – cartel did indeed threaten a blockade on exports which actually there may have been international law reasons why they couldn't, but I think they were prepared to do it and they could easily have done it. The Saudis, if they had wanted to cause some discomfiture or worse in Western Europe, could easily have said ships are not leaving the ports or they could block the pipelines in taking the oil out of the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, it was all in the eastern province in Saudi Arabia. And I think, though for a short time, there was this threat and there was some other nasty business where the Americans issued some kind of counter-threat and there was a fear that the American population, which was quite large in the eastern province because by this stage it wasn't a British oil company exploiting the oil resources, it was Aramco – the Arabian American Oil Company, now it's Saudi Aramco – which was staffed, not entirely but largely, by American staff, and they felt at threat, the American Embassy in Jedda felt that the American community in the eastern province was possibly going to have to be evacuated. I remember this amusing side aspect to it, because the American embassy imported huge numbers of ready-prepared meals, which were sort of army rations, that kind of equivalent, which they were going to hand out to the American citizens in the eastern province if an evacuation was actually required, but it never was, so the American Embassy in Jedda was left sitting on this huge number of ready-packed meals and we used to go camping a lot with friends from the American Embassy and, while we just brought our ordinary food and had quite nice food, bought from the local supermarket, they

were obliged to eat up these dreadful rations in order to get through this huge stock that they couldn't bring themselves to destroy!

Anyway, sorry, life in Jedda, so you asked about our house, and I'll just answer that question. We felt incredibly lucky. There was a compound, an embassy compound and this was about the time where, increasingly in Saudi Arabia but it was only just starting, expatriates were being housed in compounds. Now it's almost universal: a few live in independent villas or houses but most expatriates in Saudi Arabia live in compounds and are, as it were, insulated from the outside world. Some of these compounds are very nice indeed, you know, have swimming-pools, have little shops and it enables families, and I am of course especially talking about women, to live a normal life because they don't have to get into cars to go shopping or go to the swimming-pool or play tennis or whatever else they want to do. We had a very nice compound in Jedda, which had the whole works on it: an Embassy, the Ambassador's Residence, smart houses for people of Counsellor rank, other smaller, but also smart houses, for people of other ranks and I think people really felt quite well-housed, but there wasn't quite enough space for us and we had a villa, which was in fact only just outside the compound, but we were independent. And we felt this was really quite nice because it meant that, if we entertained people – and I'll come back to entertaining Saudis in a minute – that they didn't then have to go through the security, it was very light security in those days but nevertheless, you had to explain who you were to the probably Indian, I'm not sure, guard on the gate and then be directed through the compound to get to whoever's house you were going to. Whereas, in our case, we just told people where to come and they could, they were not in the compound, they didn't feel they were kind of being inspected if they came to lunch or supper with us. Entertaining Saudis was, however, very difficult. I had quite a few friends, contacts, Saudi contacts, who became sort-of friends but it was always a slightly difficult relationship. It was not easy to have genuine friends; we did eventually after two and a half years have a group of young Saudis whom we could genuinely call friends in the sense that we knew their wives, they would mix with us with their wives and we could go and have supper with them and actually just go in order to have an amusing time. But it did take a long time, a long time, to build up that sort of relationship. One guy, I'll give you one anecdote, I was the Information Officer so I was responsible for relations with the press and politics and so on and one of my contacts, an official contact, was a guy who headed something called the Saudi Press Agency which was the government's contact point for journalists, a useful person for me to know. So, I said, 'would you come to dinner with your

wife?’ And he said, ‘yes, we will come, but only on these conditions, the conditions are that nobody else comes, that we sit on the floor and that we do not have knives and forks and that we have English food.’ Concocting a menu that has British food but that you could eat with your fingers was really quite difficult but anyway we somehow managed it.

MG: You’ve got to give me a for instance! You could have had lamb cutlets!

SL: I can’t remember! Yes. And this thing about not having anyone else present was very important socially and we came across this actually later, twenty years later, where people would come to our house but ... and men would come by themselves, even if other women were going to be present, but they would only bring their wives if they were absolutely confident that nobody else there would, as it were, sneak on them. They didn’t want it being said to their friends and colleagues, ‘oh, Abdullah allows his wife to be seen by those foreigners.’ That’s what it’s about.

MG: I see, I wanted to know what it was about. That’s quite contrary to our culture.

SL: No. I think it’s in certain cultures perfectly understandable, if you’ve got a pretty wife you don’t want other people looking at her.

MG: Would she not have been veiled and masked in those days?

SL: Yeah, but they tend to take the head-veil off inside.

MG: Even in a stranger’s house, as it were, that would be part of the ... going to a friend’s house, even though you’re a foreigner, they would take the veil off indoors?

SL: Yes.

MG: I see, yes. So was it impossible, then, to get a group together? You did say you got one together eventually.

SL: Yes, but that was with wives. We had lots of parties with men, or men coming to parties where European or other wives would be present, but their own wouldn’t.

MG: I see. You said I ought to write down the name of the ambassador at the time in case I get it wrong, the chap who ...

SL: The ambassador in Jedda? Alan Rothnie.

MG: And who else were you there at the time with? Anyone who then went on, like yourself, to do great things?

SL: Yeah, Alan Rothnie then went on ... he was ambassador in Switzerland, after going to Jedda, and he was knighted, he was KCVO, I think, because the Queen came to Berne for a visit. And my immediate boss was Hooky Walker, Howard Walker, who was known as Hooky, who was later ambassador in Baghdad and knighted.

MG: My understanding of the situation at the time was that, because of the growth in demand for oil, the Saudi Arabian economy was burgeoning and you've confirmed that they were bringing themselves into the twentieth century.

SL: Yes, yes.

MG: And at the same time, western economies had enjoyed a post-war boom and were stalling, in England at the time we were having all sorts of strikes, and I wondered how that struck you from being in Saudi Arabia at a time when it was becoming a really key player? They must have started the building up of arms at that stage.

SL: Yeah. Yes, I remember one of my very first jobs was to join straight into the team that was negotiating one of the first large arms deals with the Saudis, which was for Lightning aircraft. My job was to check on the interpretation, and the translation of written documents, because the Saudis were providing an interpreter and the British team, headed by the guy who was the head of Defence Sales at the time, called Lester Suffield, were concerned that the Saudis were not interpreting accurately, so I sat through these very, very long negotiations, making sure that the Saudi interpreter was getting things right, so I had to interrupt from time to time. I have to explain a really important part about life in the embassy in Jedda at that time which was that ...

MG: ... Riyadh was the capital. And you couldn't live in Riyadh. Was that the position at the time?

SL: Yes. The Saudis had decided quite early on, I think in the time of the first King of Saud, they had decided that they did not want foreigners living in the interior, right in the interior, the heart of the country, Riyadh is right in the middle and so they kept the foreign representation in Jeddah and of course we'd had representation in Jeddah for a very long time because it's the nearest port to Mecca, for the Hajj and Jeddah had been known until then as the City of the Consuls because that was where the consular representatives of foreign powers lived and we still had an Embassy boat. I think the origins of the ambassador having a motor launch had been so that the British representative or consul, could go out to the Hajj ships in the port and be independent really. Of course, by the time we were there, this was only for recreation, it was a very nice recreation facility. And it's important to remember that there was virtually no public entertainment, and even now actually, no cinemas. I suppose there were football games but I don't think any of the embassy attended them. And so all the entertainment that we had, we did ourselves – concerts, music, we must have imported films, that's right, we had a film night in the embassy about once a week and these compounds would also have their films brought in. But for us the main recreation there, especially when we were in Saudi Arabia twenty years later, was to go camping, so we would explore the country and just throw stuff in the back of a Landrover and go out camping. We did some wonderful trips. What led me onto that? Boats, consuls, Jeddah, oh yes. So the embassies were all in Jeddah but the government was in Riyadh and we had, the British embassy had, a villa, an empty villa which we rented in Riyadh, where there was a servant, an Indian servant, who maintained it day to day but there was no British person living there then: there was later, but not then. On my desk in Jeddah, I would have a separate tray in which I put files that needed action in Riyadh, things that I couldn't do through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jeddah. What we were supposed to do was – this is quite important for me to record actually because it may be a little bit difficult to see this from the official paperwork - to have contact with the ministries in Riyadh, in every case, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jeddah, which was of course completely impractical. We would send what was called a Note, a Diplomatic Note – “Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy present their compliments to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and have the honour to request ...” - and that was how we were supposed to do business, completely impractical for a country

like us, who, as you say, was developing trade and other relationships with the kingdom at a rapid rate, so as I say, I had this tray and when it got so deep, I would say 'time to go to Riyadh.' This would happen roughly every six weeks and I would bundle all the papers into my briefcase with a bottle of whisky, I'll come back to that in a minute, and ask someone in the embassy to be kind enough to get me a ticket and off I would go to Riyadh, spent typically two days in Riyadh, walked round the ministries, do my business with the various people I had to do business with at the ministries and come back to Jeddah and then I'd have to write a Note to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs saying 'Her Britannic Majesty's Embassy present their compliments' etc ... Through informal contacts between the Embassy and the Ministry of Such-and-Such, it has been agreed that so-and-so ...' and then honour was satisfied. The people in the Ministry knew perfectly what we were doing, but we hadn't breached the convention whereby we didn't have direct and overt contact with the ministries in Riyadh, that was how we did business and that was what I did for two-and-a-half years.

MG: And the bottle of whisky?

SL: We imported goods as I think is probably still done, people say 'through the diplomatic bag' which is a silly expression, we imported a container of booze every six months or something and other supplies, tins of ham, other things we couldn't get locally. And the container, a sealed container, would arrive, either by truck or ship, get delivered to the Embassy and then we would open it up. So we at the Embassy had supplies of alcohol. The Saudis knew what we were doing and didn't mind as long as we were discreet and above all didn't sell it. What they really hated, clamped down on, was embassies who sold booze. So we had really strict rules about this in the Embassy and, as far as I know, people respected them. And it created a certain amount of bad feeling with the British community because of course they had no access to stuff except stuff that was smuggled, of course there was a big smuggling operation, people could buy it on the black market and a few people manufactured it. And again the Saudis didn't mind people making beer and wine, or didn't mind people making it for their own consumption, but if you got caught of course you were in trouble, for example if you had some bottles, either smuggled or manufactured, in your car and there was a road accident, you'd get caught and there'd be trouble, you'd be fined or put in jail and again, above all in my time, rules, customs may have changed since but in my time again the Saudis really clamped down on people who distilled and it was mainly to do with selling because, I don't know if you've ever distilled alcohol, but at any rate, it's kind of a large-

scale process. It's only economical to do it if you do a large quantity. And if you're doing a large quantity, you must therefore be selling it and if you're selling it, you're trading in alcohol, that's what they really clamped down on.

MG: And they were as anti-selling it to other expatriate Brits as they would be to the natives? I could understand them not wanting it to be sold to Saudi nationals ...

SL: Yes, any trading was beyond limits. So I put a bottle of whisky in my briefcase because at an early stage, the ambassador or the consul told me that this was the way we were going to keep the villa in Riyadh stocked, by each of us just taking one bottle at a time. We couldn't take it up *en masse* obviously, we didn't need to because there weren't very many people using the villa but we did have a small supply there for our own and for entertaining reasons.

MG: You mentioned Sheikh Yamani earlier – he figured a great deal in newspapers and on the television in Great Britain at the time, what was his profile? Did you have much to do with him?

SL: Not personally, no, I didn't have much to do with ministers, he was Oil Minister at the time, the Ambassador did and I think I remember one meeting, it was quite soon after the war, I think October 1973, where the Ambassador took me along but I can't say I had a lot to do with him, no.

MG: I just wondered what you were called, when you'd been a Third Secretary in London years before, so what was your title?

SL: I was Third Secretary then and was promoted, it was more or less automatic, you know, it was a bit like passing probation, to be promoted to Second Secretary which I was while I was in Jeddah.

MG: And did you have any formal area that you were in charge of?

SL: At the Embassy in Jeddah? I was a political officer in the political section which was still called a chancery and also responsible for the small information section.

MG: And were there many visits from the government in the UK to Saudi Arabia at that time, because I imagine it was quite important for defence and petrol and oil?

SL: Yes. Do you know, I don't actually remember a great deal about ministerial visits. I don't think they were very frequent, I mean ministers travelled a lot less than they do now and the foreign minister, the Foreign Secretary travelled quite a bit, but other ministers hardly at all in those days. Quite different from Prague for example, where I remember in 1990 we had eight visits by various ministers in a year.

MG: And what about the royal family? Was it too early for them to, because they've got quite a good relationship with Saudi Arabia?

SL: No, I don't remember anyone coming then during that period. I was there for two-and-a-half years, I don't remember a royal visit. I may just be failing to remember.

MG: So you were there until May 1975, when you became the Private Secretary to the Head of Delegation in Brussels.

### **UK REP Brussels, July 1975 -1978**

SL: Yes, well, in career terms, I was delighted because you know I was at a stage in my career where I needed to have something else, I mean this happened later on as well, you don't want to be stuck in the Arab world entirely, and to have a job in Brussels was really ideal for me. It gave me that insight and inner experience of the European institutions, which, although I never went back to Brussels, was invaluable throughout my career in every place.

MG: Now, who was the Head of Delegation?

SL: Well initially it was Michael Palliser and then Donald Maitland. Michael Palliser had already been nominated to be Permanent Undersecretary, by the time I arrived, so he must

have left really quite soon, about six months after I arrived, and then Sir Donald Maitland took over: he was an Arabist actually so we had a certain amount in common.

MG: You say it was interesting but redundant.

SL: Yes! Yes, it was. I mean, it was interesting because I was right at the centre of the mission and so I saw everything that was important going on at the time. The trouble is that they didn't really, the Head of Delegation, the Head of Representation, didn't really need a Grade 7 I think it was called, a Second Secretary to be his, or her, Private Secretary. What he needed was a super PA and I'd just inherited something from my predecessor, a guy called Jim Poston, we were frankly, Jim and I, doing jobs that were below our pay grade, overpaid for the stuff we were doing, which was assembling briefs and putting them into boxes and making sure that the Head of Delegation had everything that he needed to do his job effectively and I'm not quite sure how it had happened. Let's put it another way: a top civil servant like the Head of Delegation in Brussels does not need the kind of service that a minister needs; and we had built a private office for Sir Michael Palliser which was appropriate for a junior minister, well, he's not! And this is not to derogate from the importance of that place as a post in the FO, or in the British Government Service, it's to say that a civil servant doesn't need that kind of interface with the people who are working for him and, you know, if a minister has a question, he very often asks the Private Secretary and a Private Office Secretary will give him the answer. If Michael Palliser had a question, he wanted to talk directly to the Head of the Trade Section or the Head of the Labour Section or the Head of the Agriculture Section or whatever it was in the mission, he wasn't going to get an answer from me. So for a while, we sort of tolerated this while Palliser was there and for the beginning of Maitland's time, and Maitland then said, 'look, this isn't working, this isn't good for either you or me,' so I was moved, in the mission still in Brussels, to a desk which had been previously occupied by Michael Arthur (who was later High Commissioner in India) and this was a responsibility for the institutions, meaning the European Parliament – or Assembly as we called it then – and one or two other institutions in Brussels and that was a much more satisfactory job.

MG: It seems to me that you were there at a very, very important time because we had a referendum whether we should stay in, so you were there just after that.

SL: Just a fraction after that, yes.

MG: And the vote, as we know, went in favour of staying in – the Labour government must have been still torn because they at that stage had been not unanimously in favour of the EU, Tony Benn was very vociferous. Was there a European Parliament at that time?

SL: Yes, it was called, well we rather obstinately called it an assembly – the European Assembly – because we thought that parliaments existed only in sovereign states and we resisted then, as indeed we resist now, the idea that the European Communities, as they then were, the Common Market as it was generally called in the UK, but the other member states, we were nine then, the other eight referred to it as a parliament and the parliament itself dressed itself up as a parliament, but it had no parliamentary powers.

MG: When did they start having elections to it?

SL: Well, I was there for the negotiation of the deal that led to the first direct elections, I can't remember when the first ones were, but I was involved in all of those negotiations.

MG: So that must have been quite heated and complicated, mustn't it?

SL: Yes, it was all ... yes.

MG: And how did we end up getting the kind of proportional representation vote that I think we have ended up with? Because it's not a direct election, it's not sort of 'one man, one vote', is it?

SL: Well, what we negotiated, surely, was that the different member states could arrange things according to their own systems. Yes, we have constituencies, they are large constituencies but the negotiations that I was involved in were about how many members of the new directly-elected parliament, oh that's right, so the Assembly at the time was indirectly elected, that is to say that all the national parliaments elected or chose their own members, and of course the way the British did it was by saying, 'well, we had so many places, so many seats in the European Assembly (EA) and our proportion of the House of Commons is like this, ABC for Conservative, Labour, and Liberal or SDP or whoever they

were at the time, and so in those proportions we will send this number of members and each party can decide who it wants to send, so they were all MPs but they were indirectly elected to the EA. The discussion that I was involved in was the so-called direct elections where voters would choose their member and so then we had two arguments. One was how many members would there be in the new assembly, but the other was what would be the method of election and, knowing the dispositions, the preferences of the other eight at the time, I suspect that they probably all wanted a common system across Europe and I suspect that the British, I'm projecting back, said, 'no, we're not going to have your rotten proportional representational system, or variations on it, we're not going to have a common European system, we're going to have our own,' and so we've ended up – haven't we? – with constituencies.

MG: You mention Ivor Roberts' forecast, what is it?

SL: The whole business of direct elections was very contentious in British politics at the time and there were bits of the British system that didn't want them to happen at all and what I do remember from the Brussels end was that these negotiations went on and on and on. And I can't remember what they were all about, again it will all be recorded because we made records and we reported back, and the detail in which we reported back, the telegrams we sent from EUCO in Brussels, as the mission was called, were extraordinary, I mean masses of stuff which went back into Whitehall. So it will all be there. And we had these agonising meetings which went on late into the night, and no doubt one of the reasons they were agonising was because we were getting very difficult, very awkward, instructions from London. The Ivor Roberts telephone call - forecast - was I remember a telephone call which we had quite late one evening. He was a desk officer in the relevant department in London, they were called EID – European Integration Department – and one was internal and one was external, that is to say, there was EID(I) and EID(E), the E dealt with foreign trade issues and the I, in which Ivor Roberts sat, was dealing with internal issues with the institutions. I remember Ivor ringing me and saying, 'well, what I can't put down in writing but what I'm pretty sure is happening is that ministers don't want this negotiation to succeed.' Actually what he said was that they wanted it to run into the sand, so, I think he was doing me a kindness, he was trying to explain to me why our instructions were so awkward, and I can explain to you, I suppose, what it's like sitting in this big room, interpreter booths up there and the chairman of the meeting for the Presidency at one end and you're sitting in the British

Delegation desk and you've got in front of you this set of instructions from London and you, if you're me because you're embarrassed by the whole thing, you blush furiously and say, 'I'm instructed to say, Mr Chairman, that ...' and everybody says, 'oh my God, those Brits again!' But that was how it was. And so what Ivor was trying to do was explain that the reason why we had these awkward instruction was because, actually, behind it all, they didn't want direct elections to happen at all, they were very happy with the current situation.

MG: So, going back to the domestic side of things – you're in Belgium, Brussels, for three years and what was life like? It's got a good cuisine, did it have a good social life?

SL: Yes, we had a good social life, yes, I mean there were all the normal things that you would associate with a European capital at that time. We happened to have quite a few friends in the national delegations to NATO, French and German friends there as well. We had friends in the Commission, my wife did quite a lot of acting, there was a very strong am-dram group, still is I think, I did a bit of music, yes we did a whole lot of things.

MG: So were you sorry to come back to London at the end of that in '78?

SL: No. I'd done two postings abroad, it was the right time to come back to London.

**FCO London, Desk officer for Germany (WED), Maritime delimitation (MAED), Namibia (SAfrD), May 1978-1983**

MG: I haven't got dates for when you became the London Desk Officer for Germany, so it must have been some time ...

SL: May '78.

MG: And how long...? I mean, you didn't go away again until '83 so you were home for ...

SL: Five years. I did three jobs in London. The Desk Officer for Germany, then I worked in a department called MAED – Maritime, Aviation and Environment Department. And then I had a very interesting job as Namibia Desk Officer.

MG: Now, you've said about the German Desk Officer, it's a paradox, and you say the FCO was not material and you were organising summits, could you explain that?

SL: The paradox is that you'd think the Desk Officer for Germany, a country with whom we have and had very close relations, would be a very important person. But he or she is not, because the British government, even more now but even then this was the case, even then we found that the British governmental machine across the board had sufficiently close relations with its opposite numbers in Germany and France, I suppose, for them to be able to get in contact directly with their opposite numbers if they needed to. Or, as likely as not if there was, say, a trade issue, it would be dealt with through Brussels and the place where I'd just come from, UKRep at Brussels, would deal with it so the department I was in, the Western European Department, was actually not a very important department in FO terms at all. Whereas if you're a desk officer for Saudi Arabia, to take a rather extreme example at the other end, a British official in the Department of Trade, say, who has a problem with a trade question with Saudi Arabia has got to go to the FO to get it sorted out, wouldn't have a hope of sorting it out by ringing up or even travelling to Riyadh, at least you wouldn't travel to Riyadh without prior preparation, do you see the difference?

MG: I do. But at this time, Germany's still East and West, isn't it? So you were West Germany?

SL: Yes. I was in another Third Room, so there's a Head of Department, who's called David Gladstone.

MG: Any relation?

SL: I think so, yes. And the Assistant was Peter Vereker, who had been in the Third Room in India with me on my very first job. And then we had a Third Room and it was very nice, it was terrific fun because I was Desk Officer for West Germany, over the other side of the desk was the Desk Officer for East Germany, very interesting job because it had strongly political stuff going on: he spent a lot of time on Rudolf Hess and those problems, and then there was a new entrant who was mainly also East Germany because there was more work. This

exemplifies what I was saying actually, there was more FO work on East Germany with whom we had very bad relations, than there was with West Germany, the Federal Republic, which I was doing. I sort of enjoyed it too, to a certain extent and, as I say, I organised summits because they were very frequent: I think there was a summit every six months. And there's a lot of briefing to get together and organisation to do to make sure that worked, as no one else is going to do it so ...

MG: Well, who were attending these summits?

SL: Well, Helmut Schmidt in that case.

MG: And the PM?

SL: The Prime Minister.

MG: But they were bipartite?

SL: Yes.

MG: So you were there for how long doing that?

SL: It must have been a couple of years, I suppose. I can't quite work out the timing because it was only five years and I did three jobs. Perhaps I only did the maritime job for a year or eighteen months.

MG: What was the maritime job?

SL: Well, it was sort of interesting but it was work that had to be done but it was not political. You know what any ambitious civil servant wants to do is to be in a department or in an area where ministers are taking notice and that's why I enjoyed the Middle East because there's always something where ministers are taking notice of for obvious reasons, I mean oil or war or something ghastly, some ghastly consular problem or whatever and this was not the case in maritime affairs! Another part of the department was negotiating the Law of the Sea Convention: that was quite interesting, but I wasn't doing that. I had a job in dealing with, it

sounds crazy, anyway this is what it was: delimitation of mainly maritime borders on behalf of British dependent territories. So if, for example – and this was an example – the British Virgin Islands had a disputed maritime border with its neighbour, I can't remember who their maritime neighbours are now but we were the protecting power so we had to deal with it, not the BVI people. And actually funnily enough, we were just at the end of a negotiation, we'd just completed a negotiation about maritime delimitation with France in the Channel, it was a disputed line, it was surprising, as late as 1981 there was a disputed line with France but there was.

MG: I saw the treaty – did you have a hand in that?

SL: Yes, well no, only the propagation of it afterwards. So these were the things I did, it was quite interesting ... important bits of geography but, as I say, it was in political terms a backwater.

MG: I had erroneously thought that you might have been involved in fishery policy because that was and has been and continues to be a hot potato and we had the Icelandic Cod wars.

SL: Yes, but that was a European issue, that was Brussels, so that was a big issue when I was in Brussels.

MG: So you were dealing with it then?

SL: I personally wasn't but it was being dealt with by the mission, yes, absolutely. No, I remember, actually I was in the ambassador's, Palliser's, house, when a furious argument was going on between a British minister and I think the NATO Secretary-General because we had British ships physically bumping up against Icelandic ships in the north-west, I remember them shouting down the telephone at each other.

MG: We never won any of those cod wars though, did we?

SL: Not really, no.

MG: I know that Anthony Crosland couldn't understand how we'd got into the situation of being in a war like that that we couldn't win and he was in a dreadful position because he represented Grimsby.

SL: Well, exactly, we had to get involved in it because the people in Grimsby and Hull and other places were losing their livelihoods.

MG: And in Scotland, and that's a big issue again now.

SL: Of course.

MG: But that wasn't to do with the ... only when I saw mention of Rockall ... what's that? Because apart from being on the shipping forecast, what other relevance has it got?

SL: Well, it was huge, because if – I'd probably need a map to show you, but anyway roughly-speaking I'll try to do it in words – the British at the time - I think we've given way on it now because it was really crazy - were claiming, and a lot of this work by the way was driven by the FCO Legal Advisers and they were terrific, I had huge admiration for them, particularly two: a guy called Henry Darwin and the other, Frank Berman, Frank Berman later became the Principal Legal Adviser, they were very good on all this sort of stuff and sort of held our hands. We were in close league with the Legal Advisers, more in that job than any other job I'd done before or since. Anyway, the British were holding to the position that in maritime delimitation between Ireland and the UK, the island of Rockall should be counted. Now this was at a time where we didn't know what was underneath the continental shelf and the Law of the Sea allowed you to exploit maritime resources on the continental shelf but not thereafter, 12-mile limit on the continental shelf, so if you draw a line between Britain and Ireland counting the furthest point of Ireland which is round that northwest bit, which isn't northern Ireland, I'm talking about the Republic of Ireland. And you draw a line from there and the nearest point on the UK mainland and if you count Rockall, then the line goes pretty well due west and includes a huge slice of continental shelf to the British advantage which does not get included if you don't count Rockall. Rockall is an uninhabited island, hardly an island, out on its own on the North Sea. So we were in dispute with the Irish as to whether Rockall should count or not and it makes a big difference.

MG: And did you win?

SL: Well, during my time we held the position, I wouldn't say we won. As I recall, I think we've given way, in my view quite rightly but I wasn't in a position to argue against the lawyers from my humble position as a Desk Officer!

MG: So, the third job in this period – Namibia. Now, Namibia was a part of German South-West Africa, wasn't it, after the First War. So I'd rather have thought maybe you got involved with Namibia because you were desk officer for Germany.

SL: No connection.

MG: Nothing at all?

SL: No, I don't know why I went there – the FO thought it was the kind of thing I could do and it was a really interesting job, it was terrific fun, because, and again I'll try not to go over what's in the paperwork, but we had a group of five who were the people who had been the five members of the Security Council – the western five members of the Security Council – at the time that a Security Council Resolution had been passed calling for the independence of Namibia.

MG: Because South Africa had annexed it or ...

SL: Yes, it was a very, it was a curious relationship, it wasn't exactly a South African colony and they had only a very limited form of apartheid in it, but it wasn't fully independent. We five – US, UK, France, Canada, Germany – so it's the three permanent members – US, UK and France – and then Canada and Germany, we undertook to negotiate with a group called the Frontline States who were African countries calling for the independence of Namibia, to try and get the South Africans to agree. The sticking point was about the presence of Cubans in Angola because the Angolans were hosting a large number, I think it was 25,000, of Cuban troops.

MG: That's an enormous number.

SL: Yes, it was a huge number. And the South Africans refused to give independence to Namibia while those Cubans were still there because they said, 'we don't want these 'commie bastards', so to speak, sitting on our frontier.'

MG: Well apart from that it is a large force, isn't it?

SL: Yes, and we got very close. There was a person called Maeve Fort in the FO, who was in our delegation to the United Nations, and we were so close to getting this negotiation through that we actually bought an air ticket, I think I held it in my hands, had an air ticket for Maeve Fort to go out to be our first British High Commissioner in Windhoek. But then the negotiations collapsed and it didn't work. But I used to travel, a delegation of two – the Africa Director, a guy called Len Allinson, and he and I used to get together with our oppos in the Five all over the place trying to get these negotiations through, including flying over Africa in little aeroplanes to all these meetings. It was a really interesting job and, as I say, very nearly successful and the politics at the time were also all to do with calls to sanctions against South Africa which the FO was resisting.

MG: Yes, I understand. Mrs Thatcher was still against Nelson Mandela at that time, wasn't she. But you mention this mayor of Swakopmund, 'one day all this will be Sam's'. What's that? Who's Sam?

SL: Although I did most of the travel with Len Allinson, as I say, as part of this group of five, I did also make a visit to South Africa and to Namibia, just for familiarisation. Things have changed since I joined, when I joined the FO in 1970, there was no question – no one even mentioned it – of my going out to Kathmandu to see the country that I was dealing with. Travel in relative terms was much more expensive and departments had tiny travel budgets, but by this time - where are we? '81, '82 – it was considered useful that I should do a familiarisation visit, so off I went. I didn't spend very much time in Johannesburg, a little bit a day I suppose, couple of days in Cape Town talking to people, and then with the person in the Embassy in Cape Town/Pretoria we then went up to Namibia together, I've forgotten his name, he left the FO quite soon after. And Windhoek is the capital, we went there, had talks and met a lot of people in the political parties there and so on, it was fine, interesting. Then we went to Swakopmund, which is on the coast obviously, from its name, and it's quite an interesting place and we went to see the mayor of Swakopmund, who's obviously a white

Namibian. There were quite a lot of white Namibians and we saw him in his office and he said, 'oh, you must come out for breakfast tomorrow morning.' He liked us and so invited us out to breakfast. So the next morning, we went out to his place which is about ten-twenty miles north of Swakopmund and it was a villa on the sea. Have you been to South Africa? There's a cold current, the Benguela current, that comes up from the South Pole and creates this ...

MG: That's why they have penguins, is it?

SL: I suppose so, yes. And creates these extraordinary weather conditions and so we stood in this villa with a huge picture window looking out over the sea and the waves crashing on the beach, a most spectacular sight, seascape. And at the time the Namibian Independence Movement was being led by a guy who was living in exile in Rwanda, called Sam Nujoma, who later became President, the first president of independent Namibia. And the mayor, this is something I rather liked about the white Namibians, that unlike, if I may say, unlike the South Africans who thought that they could hang on to things forever, the Namibians knew exactly which way things were going and, indeed, which way things ought to go. They weren't actually against the idea of independence, on the contrary, they rather felt that they didn't need to be looked after by the South Africans. Anyway, the Mayor of Swakopmund, white man, looked round this wonderful villa and this fantastic seascape and said, 'one day, all this will be Sam's.'

MG: And he meant it?

SL: He knew it, yes.

MG: We're coming to the end of your description of your time in Namibia. Was it near resolution by the time you left in '83, or ...?

SL: No I think it had gone back a bit and then I can't remember how long it took until the political circumstances changed, Cubans left and Namibia eventually got its independence.

MG: And did Maeve Fort ever become High Commissioner?

SL: No. Can't remember who the first High Commissioner was, but it wasn't Maeve.

### **Head of Chancery, Cairo, 1983-87**

MG: Right. So, you moved then back to your Arabist path. Again, you're still a pawn, you're still being told by the Personnel Department where to go?

SL: Yes.

MG: So this was in mid-1983?

SL: Yes, yes we went early summer I think, that's right.

MG: Now it's a very important time in the Arab-Israeli negotiations. Could you explain about that?

SL: Yes, well it was just after the Camp David agreements, and then after Sadat had been assassinated because of the Camp David agreements really, and in Egypt Mubarak had taken over. And I think Mubarak was a supporter of the Camp David agreements, I mean who wouldn't have been? The Americans were putting large amounts of money into Egypt as a kind of reward for signing and I think Sadat and perhaps even Mubarak had hoped that there would be a kind of peace. I think they genuinely thought that Egyptians would say, 'Ah, now we can actually go and pray in Jerusalem.' And indeed the border was open, we drove to Jerusalem from Cairo. It was relatively easy to do, drove across the Sinai Peninsula, crossed just near the Gaza strip, drove up past Gaza up into Jerusalem and back again. Mubarak was, you know, disposed of in the Arab Spring – 2011 – Mubarak's regime was considered relatively benign, I mean there were very significant internal intelligence services, it's true, but they didn't get in our way very much. And indeed I think it was a time of what they call *infatih* – opening up, opening up the economy and to a certain extent opening up the political system. They had sort of elections, they had a kind of parliament and the great thing for us as foreigners which hadn't been the case before was that we were allowed to travel freely. It was great, we did all kinds of travel, we did sort of the classic ancient Egyptian travel, flew or took a train – we always flew actually but my parents came out and took a train – to Luxor to see the ancient Egyptian stuff but we also had a Land Rover, in fact we drove there at the

start of our posting, there was an approved route out to Egypt at the time by the FO by which you were allowed to drive to Venice and take a ship from Venice to Alexandria and then drive from Alexandria to Cairo, which we did in a Land Rover. So in our Land Rover we could drive all over the place and, as I say, we could drive to Sinai which of course hadn't been possible before because it was occupied or a warzone, and we could drive both to the western desert and to the eastern desert on either side of the Nile so it was a great place to explore. And the work was very interesting. I was head of the political section, there was also a political counsellor, Michael Weston, who later was Ambassador in Kuwait at the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. I suppose the major thing that happened internally was a rebellion, a revolt, of the Internal Security Forces. This was not the intelligence services, this was a separate bunch of people whom actually the embassy didn't know very much about, it turned out, but they were called the Internal Security Forces who were not quite army and not quite police but they were underpaid and under-rewarded and they came out in a kind of mutiny. For a while the Egyptians imposed a curfew and so for a week we set up and operated a crisis centre from the embassy.

MG: You say you were burning papers.

SL: Oh, that was earlier. That was a minor thing, sorry. When I arrived in the embassy, I discovered that our weeding had fallen very badly behind, you know, these were the days when of course everything was on paper and you had to have a system of weeding papers, that is to say, destroying those which were duplicated elsewhere because in those days, you know, if you wrote a letter to the FO, you kept a copy in the Embassy and the original went to the FO, so the carbon copy could be safely destroyed because the original was in FO records in London. So we had to go through files and weed, keep things which were original, you ended up with a file about a fifth the thickness of the original and then that got sent to London for keeping in the archives. Anyway we were miles and miles behind in that and so we had to have a programme of rapid weeding and destruction. What year are we? '83, that's right, because if you recall, over in Tehran the Americans had got appallingly caught out on this, they had not weeded their stuff and, when their embassy was besieged by the Iranians, they'd stuff papers through the shredder so quickly that the Iranians then got out their Sellotape and stitched it all together again. We had a programme of shredding and then burning, well in some cases actually we burnt direct but it takes a surprisingly long time to burn a document.

MG: You say the Egyptians did not want to go to Jerusalem, but we did. I presume you mean they didn't want to go as tourists, I mean the Egyptian populace.

SL: Yes, that's right. Yes, Sadat had hoped, and I think a lot of the rest of the world had hoped, that once you got peace between an Arab country and Israel, then - I mean Sadat himself said that he wanted to pray at Jerusalem before he died, I'm not sure if he ever did - we thought that people would go as religious tourists, but the Egyptians just felt too uncomfortable about it.

MG: Is that because they're very conservative or were they under the influence of somebody?

SL: No, I mean they just felt that Jerusalem itself is a semi-occupied country and they weren't going to ... and they didn't want to go through Israeli-operated border checks and that kind of thing.

MG: But you said the borders were open.

SL: Well they were open, but you still had to show your passport to the police in those parts, yes.

MG: So what was it like, living in Egypt, in Cairo? Such a romantic place!

SL: Yes, we were very happy there, we had a very good time, fantastic time really in all sorts of ways and it was politically interesting, I was involved with the British School, in fact for a short time I was the Chair of the Governors at the British School. There was quite an active church which we played a part in, had a variety of friends, had some crazy, very amusing Egyptian friends, and, you know, there were lots of positives. But I remember very soon after I arrived, I was sitting at a party sitting next to the wife of our air attaché who had arrived about the same time as we had, so she had been there about three months, and I said, 'How are you finding it?' Just a kind of general start-up of a conversation. And she said, 'I hate it here!' And I didn't know how to take the conversation on from that, because for me it was an ideal thing to do at that stage of my career. I'd done these one Arab, one non-Arab jobs, I'd had a bit of time at the FO, so to go back to the Arab world was exactly what I

wanted to do, you know, it's perfect and of course I could see, I wasn't blind, I could see and I could hear and I could smell ... Cairo is a noisy, dusty, dirty, smelly place but I thought it had such life and vibrancy and was an amusing place to be and the Egyptians are very funny and some of them very sophisticated, so Egypt is a place that's, you know, it's a bit of a Marmite, you love it or you loathe it.

MG: She loathed it! How was it for your wife?

SL: Oh and of course it was easier for us because Sibella of course spoke pretty decent Arabic, she had decided to focus on the oral and spoken rather than the written language. And she got on in Egypt very well.

MG: And the treatment of women, I know you're winding down but the treatment of women is more free and easy than Saudi Arabia had been?

SL: Oh yes, much.

Well we better leave it there. Thank you very much for your time.

*MG: 21<sup>st</sup> of March 2018, Moira Goldstaub in conversation with Stuart Laing recalling his time as a diplomat for the Diplomatic history project.*

### **Deputy Head of Near East and North African Department, 1987-89**

MG: I think we had got to your return to London in 1987-89 ... where you are Assistant, in inverted commas.

SL: Yes well, that was the name given at that time to deputy heads of department.

MG: You are in Near East and North African Department?

SL: Yes, so the Arab and Iranian world was divided into two departments; one was the Near East and North African department, which covered North Africa obviously up to Egypt and all the Arab countries north of the Sahara, also including Sudan and the Levant; Lebanon,

Jordan, Israel and Palestine but not Iraq, Iran and the Arabian peninsula which were all covered by the Middle Eastern department.

MG: What are your strongest memories of that time?

SL: Well, I didn't mention Syria, sorry. Syria was one of ours. The significant ongoing problems throughout that time were trying to make progress on the Palestine issue with Israel. The other thing was trying to restore relations with Syria. Relations with Syria had been broken after the Hindawi affair. Hindawi was the guy who got explosives smuggled in the diplomatic bag to the Syrian embassy and then got his girlfriend – carrying the bomb – on an El Al flight to Israel from London; but the attempt to blow up the El Al aircraft failed because of security actually - I can't remember who it was who tipped off the security people but somehow the explosives were discovered and the bomb never got on board the aeroplane. In the investigation that followed it was shown that the Syrians had been importing the explosives through the diplomatic bag, so we broke relations with Syria and throughout my time in the Near East and North African Department the FO were trying to persuade No. 10 that actually we couldn't be serious players in the Middle East and help make progress on the Palestine issue unless we had diplomatic relations with Syria. And No. 10, where the Prime Minister in charge had been nearly blown up in the Brighton bomb, was not willing to go along with that argument without a declaration from the Syrians that they would give up what we called state terrorism, or state sponsored terrorism. Of course the Syrians refused to acknowledge that they ever had done so. It was the 'when did you stop beating your wife' question or 'when will you stop beating your wife' question?

MG: And it was the family that are in power at the moment that was in charge in Syria at that time?

SL: Yes Hafiz al-Assad the father of Bashar al-Assad the current president. And the other thing that I suppose was important was not having relations with Libya. In the course of doing that job I travelled all over, I managed to make visits to all Near East and North African countries except Libya because we didn't have relations with Libya. We had what was called an interest section in the Italian Embassy, so we did have a diplomatic presence there but it was not formal, it wasn't an Embassy. At that time that was because of the Lockerbie bombing and there was no attempt to restore diplomatic relations with Libya; all

that came later. The paradox was that we actually had a large number of British people, as I recall 2,500 British people living in Libya, mainly operating in the oil industry, and this was partly because the American sanctions were strong and very effective: the American sanctions imposed against Libya were much stronger than ours and Americans were not allowed to work there so that gap, if you like, in engineering expertise was filled by Britons who were very good at it.

MG: What did you think of the sanctions?

SL: They were effective in the sense that they stopped Americans working there, but it didn't have the effect of stopping the Libyan oil industry because, as I say, that was run by British engineers.

MG: Yes, I see.

SL: This is the nature of sanctions. Most sanctions, sorry I will allow myself just one political comment and then, I think, pass on. In most sanctions it has the effect that the people you are doing sanctions against, if they have any intelligence and nous themselves, they find ways round them. So for example when there were strong, industrial sanctions against South Africa particularly on oil, they found ways of creating oil from coal. With technology you can very often get round the problems.

MG: Yes I see that. You said that the Palestinian problem was one of the most important things you were dealing with and of course when you had been in Cairo it was just after the Camp David agreement and it looked as if things might be improving there. Clearly they had not.

SL: I think the first Intifada happened when I was there. And it was an ugly time.

MG: Had the Embassy staff in Egypt reduced? Is that why you came back? Or was it just the normal process?

SL: No I just came back in the normal way.

MG: What colleagues did you have then, were you in a third room? No you were too senior for that.

SL: No I was Assistant then, so there was the head of department Alan Goulty for most of the time. Alan Goulty was later Middle East director. I was the deputy head, second room and then there were two or three third rooms.

MG: How much travelling was there involved?

SL: As I say I went everywhere over the Near East and North Africa. I went everywhere except Libya. And I suppose Syria, I have been to Syria but I didn't go to Syria at that time because of the bad relations.

MG: You took what looks like a leap in a different direction in June 1989.

SL: Yes the Personnel Department said that I had ... . Oh I am sorry just before that I must relate one incident. It will presumably be on paper but it really was quite striking. In early 1989, I think it must have been April, the Middle East Director, who was then David Gore-Booth, later knighted and later my Ambassador in Riyadh, David Gore-Booth and I went to Moscow and this was just the time, we used to have regular talks with the Russians or the Soviets as I suppose you should say, and these talks were really not very fruitful but we maintained them through the years, I think once a year, quite frequently. And they became set pieces where we would sit down on each side of the table and we would say our policy in the Middle East is this and they would say our policy is that and there was no real debate and then we would all go off for lunch. Anyway, on this occasion to our astonishment, David Gore-Booth and I, the British delegation, and I think there may have been someone from the Embassy, probably I think Rod Lyne, if I recall correctly who later became Ambassador in Moscow and then had a top job in the Cabinet Office. We sat down and the Russians said "You have read that our government now has a policy of perestroika and glasnost and in the spirit of our glasnost, what we want to do is to have a genuine discussion and debate about Middle Eastern issues with you." David and I and Rod, we pretty well fell off our chairs because for three or four hours, I don't know how long, we had a long discussion with the Russians about the current situation in the Middle East and of what ought to happen and it was just an eye-opener as it was the first time this had happened; then we had the lunch as

usual. And then in the afternoon they said, “You must go along to our Middle Eastern Institute!” I’m not sure if this had been done before, I don’t think so. So David and I, without Rod, went along and we found that the people in the Middle Eastern Institute spoke no English and we spoke no Russian, but what they did do was speak very good Arabic, as both David and I did, so again we had a further discussion of Middle Eastern policy and issues with these guys from the Middle Eastern Institute who were very well informed using a third language, which I always find amusing when it happens – it was extraordinary. That was the spirit of 1989.

Then of course the Foreign office said to me, and this all still about the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism and so on, “Well you’ve done a lot of Middle Eastern stuff, and you need to have another specialization, another string to your bow”, as the expression always was. Personally I could never understand how a bow could work with more than one string but anyway they used to say it and they put various other options in front of me. One was Deputy High Commissioner, number two, in the High Commission in Ottawa, but someone else got that job, which disappointed me at the time. But actually it turned out to be very fortunate because the next thing they said was, “How about central Europe?” I didn’t mind very much; my wife Sibella was not at all keen, she didn’t want to go to a communist place, but I said yes we’ll see how it goes and another field of expertise seemed to me a interesting thing to develop, as was indeed the case, and they offered me - this was still at the point where you were not bidding for jobs but there was a kind of discussion with Personnel Department especially at more senior levels as to what sort of thing you should go to - the post of Deputy Ambassador in Prague and that seemed to be a good thing and I was accepted by the board. As I say the appointments must have been confirmed by a board which later on became the panel which handled competitive applications, but I don’t know whether I was the only candidate for the job or not. Obviously I was not the only candidate for the Canada job but I don’t know if I was the only candidate for the Prague one. And so in the summer of 1989 I left the Near East department and started Czech language training. And in those days, and I think it is probably still the case, it varies from language to language, anyway I was given four or five months off work entirely to be devoted to preparing for the posting which meant mainly language training. I had one-on-one language training with an absolutely delightful teacher; most of the lessons were in the combined language centre, which was on the second or third floor of a building off the roundabout by Lambeth bridge. It was separate from the FO main building. I enjoyed that, I enjoyed

learning Czech and I got to quite a reasonable level. By the time I had been working in Prague for a time I passed the intermediate level. I never got to the higher or advanced level.

### Counsellor, Prague, Nov 1989 - April 1992

I'll give you a bit of the atmospheric. I think all the reports are there on paper but it's the atmospheric that you want. I finished the language training and other bits of the pre-posting training all still on the assumption that I was being posted to a strongly communist ruled country. By that point people were flooding through to West Germany via Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Austria, that was the sort of leaky route that was discovered in the summer of 1989. I drove out, actually in November (the Berlin Wall fell on 9 November): it was cold and got progressively colder of course as I got nearer to central Europe and I realized as I listened to the radio as I drove that I was listening to history being made. I arrived in Prague and - Prague was a smaller city than it is now, and also a smaller city than I had imagined - I thought I was on the outskirts and all these people were flooding the roads, I had to drive very slowly because of the number of people who were off the pavements and onto the road. It was a Saturday afternoon and I assumed they were all coming back from a football match. Not at all! I checked where I was on the map, I was pretty much in the centre of Prague and all these people were coming back from that afternoon's demonstration. What was happening at that time in the revolution, the revolution started on 17<sup>th</sup> November, and literally every day there was a demonstration against the communist rule. The demonstrations started off in Wenceslas Square and then that got too small for the demonstrations because you could only get 20,000 or 30,000 into Wenceslas Square, as it is a long thin rectangle, then they moved off to another place called Letná Plain where they could get 400,000 or 500,000 people, a huge vast place. It was a park with no trees on it which is why it was called a plain, I drove past that and into the house of my predecessor, who was John Macgregor, who was clustered round the - it was incredibly cold - and he was clustered round not even the fire but the open oven in the kitchen with Edward Lucas, who is a well-known journalist who was doing a lot of the reporting, one of the very few British journalists in Prague actually at, during and through the revolution. He became quite a friend as time went on and we witnessed the rest of the revolution. That's all reported in the Diplomatic Reports: there's nothing more to say about that surely. And then the election of Havel took place at the end of December, 29<sup>th</sup> December, and then after that at the beginning of 1990 we

started the fascinating business in the Embassy of reconstructing this relationship which had been lost for 40 years.

MG: Why was it called The Velvet Revolution?

SL: Because it was not violent, no bloodletting. There was quite strong confrontation by the police, they were a bit rough but they didn't actually kill anyone!

MG: The house doesn't sound as if it was very warm. You said your wife was not very keen to go to Central Europe, how did she find it?

SL: Well, she wasn't very enthusiastic because whatever people may say about the Arab societies in which we had lived before, they were relatively free. OK, women can't drive in Saudi Arabia and so on, well they were free in the sense that you didn't have police, secret police watching you and you didn't have all the business of not having contacts with the locals, in fact on the contrary our task, our business was to get to know them. [But] in the communist countries during the cold war that was very carefully controlled and especially, for everybody, but the men for example were told to be extremely careful if they were approached by a female local because almost certainly she would have been put up to it by the state police. And you know when we arrived the house, a rather rambling place actually which was hired to us by the department of the Czechoslovak Foreign Ministry whose job it was to allocate houses to diplomats and this was incredibly carefully controlled, the whole of life. So we had this rambling house and at the side of us a garage and above the garage was a flat and in the flat was someone who was designated, by the same department that allocated the house, who was a gardener and his wife and daughter. We knew perfectly well that his job was to do a bit of digging and mow the lawn but his real job was to keep an eye on us. To report on who came to the house and all that sort of thing. Make sure the tape recorders - because the whole place was bugged - make sure the tape recorders had a tape in and all that kind of stuff and we had been briefed on all this and knew exactly what it was. And they knew we knew too. So, for example in February, just two months later, I was leaving for the Embassy, a five minute walk, I used to walk up to the nearest metro station and it so happens I was walking down the drive to get to the metro station, away from the house and out of the gardener's flat came his daughter who actually, as it happens, was a young woman of about twenty, very pretty with blond hair, and so we started chatting as we walked to the metro

station. At the station we said goodbye, I'm going this way you're going that, and she said, "How nice, two months ago we would not have been allowed to have this conversation," She knew why, she knew I had been briefed not to talk to pretty 20 year olds because of the risk of honey-traps.

MG: So did there come a time when you could debug it and they were not put back? I know in other countries at other times they would be replaced.

SL: Oh well yes, we had an arrangement with them whereby they would tell us where the bugs were to save us time. We could find them if we wanted to; we never bothered to find them during the communist times because they were simply replaced with others. But once we had a relationship with the intelligence services they told us where the bugs were and we took them out and they were not replaced.

MG: It must have made a great deal of difference to you.

SL: Yes effectively we were living in a free country, they made the currency free, there was a black market in currency when we arrived, they had elections and they developed the free market economy.

MG: Who was the Ambassador that you were serving under?

SL: Laurence O'Keeffe, a very nice man.

MG: He sounds Irish.

SL: Earlier on yes, undetectable but of Irish background, his wife Suzanne was French, he has died since and then he was succeeded by David Brighty, later Ambassador in Spain. Laurence retired from Prague. In those days the retirement age was 60.

MG: Did you have many dealings with Vaclav Havel?

SL: Not personally very much, he's died now of course, I don't think he would have recognized me, but we did know his brother Ivan and his sister-in-law Dagmar quite well, in

fact we went on a picnic with them, or lunch, on our very last day in Czechoslovakia a couple of years later.

MG: Because the Wall had come down were you getting more ministerial visits from the UK?

SL: Absolutely, again a flood. We had virtually no ministerial visits to communist countries during the Cold War, so we had a very small Embassy. The Embassy was going through a major refurbishment programme, which complicated life a bit, we ended up with a very nicely modernized Embassy and yet we had to handle eight ministerial visits in that year, 1990, including the Prime Minister. The following year Prince Charles and Princess Diana came at an ill-fated time because it was just when their marriage was falling apart. It was very shortly before the visit they did to Korea.

MG: When they came what was it like? Did you hold a banquet inviting all?

SL: Yes, normal diplomatic life took over very quickly. All the western embassies had ministerial and other senior visits. The Czechs were just desperate to restore the relationship that they had felt had been unfairly torn away from them in 1948 when Gottwald took over and communism was installed. So they invited our people and our people were very keen to come as they saw it as an opportunity to let western European values - I hesitate over the word western because as you know Prague is west of Vienna - into communist countries. All sorts of things, all recorded and I don't need to go over them, but they varied from visits by the PM and the Prince of Wales at the top level which were handled extremely efficiently, the Czechs and Slovaks were extremely good at doing these things, to lots of visits by officials. We did training courses; we had private sector visitors doing the privatization programme which was a largely British invention in Czechoslovakia, whole lot of stuff. This included Slovakia so I would often find myself meeting a visitor in Prague and then drive the visitor to Bratislava; they would do their things with the Slovaks and then very often they would leave. Bratislava had no international Airport but Bratislava is only 45 minutes' drive from Vienna airport, Schwechat; it was extremely efficient to drop off the visitor at Schwechat and then drive back up to Prague through Moravia.

MG: The thing I am interested in is the cuisine. We know about Hungarian cuisine but you never hear about Czech cuisine; has it got a distinctive culture and character?

SL: I can't say about now, as I haven't been there for a bit but it was pretty dull, and of course very little stuff was available. It was all very seasonal, very little imported out of season. From that point of view it was very like the UK when I was a boy in the 1960s. You had strawberries for a short season and no other time and the same was true in Czechoslovakia. A lot has been written about how life was and how people bartered and people grew stuff on their little gardening plots with tiny little houses outside Prague, the Czechs did I mean and they would grow fresh vegetables there because they could not get them adequately in the shops. They ate a lot of red meat but virtually no fish except for the curious habit of eating carp at Christmas.

MG: So you have happy memories of that?

SL: Yes. The revolution was extremely exciting but actually, from the professional point of view, the period that followed was more interesting because, as I say, we were rebuilding this relationship and then we began to see the process at the end of 1991 beginning of 1992, of the Czechs and Slovaks falling apart. So having had a velvet revolution they then had a velvet divorce.

MG: I'm interested that they were successful in constructing a pluralist democracy and a free market economy; Russia at the same time with more natural resources etc. was not. To what do you attribute their success?

SL: This is an ongoing debate and we could talk about it all night and I am afraid I don't know the answer! I came across this more in the job I did later. Can we come back to this when we talk about the Knowhow Fund after Riyadh?

### **Deputy Head of Mission and Consul-General, Riyadh, 1992–95**

MG: Of course, I am in your hands. At the end of April 1992 you are moving back to Riyadh. I say moving back but you had been in Jeddah before!

SL: Yes what happened was that in the early part of 1992 the FO rang, Stephen Lamport, whom I knew reasonably well and got to know better later - actually he is an old member of this college (Corpus Christi) - he was my personnel officer, or for people of my grade I should say, which was counsellor at that time, he rang up and said that Derek Plumbly who was deputy head of mission in Riyadh had had to move more quickly than expected to go to New York and would I allow my name to go forward to replace him? I don't know whether Stephen said this directly, but the impression he gave me was that there would be no other candidate. In other words they couldn't find anybody to go to Riyadh, so if I wanted the job it was mine for the choosing. Anyway I hesitated a lot because we were very happy in Prague, but in the end I said I thought it was a good career move and so I agreed to go. That all went through quite quickly; Derek went off to New York quite soon, I followed to Riyadh as fast as I could and became DHM in April 1992.

MG: And you were in Riyadh this time, as before you had been in Jedda?

SL: Yes, the Embassy moved there in '79, '80, something like that. So the embassy was in the diplomatic quarter, and the way that it works is that there are a few compounds but mostly the houses of diplomats are not in compounds but they are in a huge, a large, area called the diplomatic quarter, which has security guards at the two or three car road entry points, but within it there are sort of normal roads and a supermarket and banks and facilities. So everybody in our embassy has a British-built house, or a house built to British specifications, I should say, but with a front door giving on to the street, so you have a measure of security but a measure of sort of ordinary public life. And we had a very nice house there as Deputy Head of Mission beside the house of Chris Wilton who was the commercial counsellor and yes, that was how life was.

MG: And who was your ambassador?

SL: The ambassador was first of all Alan Munro and then, as I said before, David Gore-Booth.

MG: So that must have been very pleasant serendipity for you when he came out.

SL: Yes, they were both excellent people to work for.

MG: So, again, you said that in passing, you're somewhere sort of where history has left an imprint because it was just after the First Gulf War.

SL: Yes, I must say and this isn't really relevant to your project but I will just say it, it was in some ways an extraordinary move because neither world understood the other. That's to say that, when we arrived in Riyadh, people politely would say, as you do, 'Oh yes, where have you come from?' And I would launch off into a great description of 'Well, I've just come from central Europe where the world has changed, communism has fallen, democracy and free market economies have broken out and we were there to witness all that change.' And people, both Arabs and expatriates, would look at us blankly and say, 'Oh yes, well let me tell you about how it went when the rockets were falling during the First Gulf War.' And, as I say, central Europe didn't really understand what was going on in the Middle East. I mean, I did personally because I was interested in the Middle East, but previous to that of course when I was in Prague and people said, 'Oh, Stuart, you're leaving!' I said, 'Yes, it's very exciting, I'm going to Riyadh as Deputy Ambassador in our premier embassy in the Middle East where we have thousands of British expatriates and exports worth hundreds and hundreds of millions of pounds,' and they would look blankly at me as the Arabs would subsequently look blankly at me when I talked about central Europe. There was just absolutely no connection and no understanding, it was a very weird experience. But, because, as I say, I arrived just after, well the year after, Saudi Arabia being filled with 500,000 allied troops come to liberate Kuwait, so a lot of the relationships there were in the aftermath of that and Alan Munro had been there through it all as had, of course, Derek [Plumbly].

MG: But obviously that would have meant that relations were warm I imagine because we'd fought with them. So you mention postings in opaque societies, could you expand on what you mean by that?

SL: Well, in a place like Saudi Arabia, information is not given away, I mean there's obviously a kind of parliament which is called Majlis al-Shura, meaning Consultative Council, but members of the Shura Council did not particularly ... well, many of them actually positively did not want to talk to foreign diplomats. I remember having a long conversation with one, I just wanted to, got hold of the telephone number of the member of

the Shura Council and said, 'Could I possibly come to call on you, have a cup of coffee, sit with you?' He said, 'Why?' I said, 'Well, I'm a diplomat here and we like to get to know people of the country where I can.' And he said, 'My job as a member of the Shura Council, advisory council or consultative council, my job as a member of this advisory council is to give advice to the king, not to you.' So, this was all in Arabic, so the word *shura* (advice) came over more clearly than it does in English. So they don't particularly want to talk to foreigners, they don't see the need of talking to foreigners, except when they're doing a sort of commercial deal or something like that. There's no free press, it's very difficult even to get to see people, let alone to get them to talk openly and frankly to you. So that's why I talk about a closed society, I'm not talking about open-closed society in the sense of Popper, though it is closed in that sense too, I mean just that they play their cards close to their chests and don't reveal things to you. So if you want to get a decision, let's say you want to get a major British contract for a British company, it's very difficult to know which buttons to push and which levers to pull. You have a sort of feeling that this decision will be taken by the minister of defence, let's say it's an arms deal or you know a sale of some munitions or aircraft or something, or take a civilian one, let's say we want to sell, as indeed we did, civilian aircraft to the relevant authority, so you can work out relatively easily, not always, but relatively easily which authority in the kingdom, which ministry or civil aviation authority or whatever is going to take the decision and who the boss of that is, you can find that out, but you can't, unless you're very lucky, you can't normally get to know that person, so that when the British businessman comes along you've got a friendly, jokey relationship with that person and can ease these things along. That's normally what you try to do in diplomatic life, but it's just a hundred times more difficult in a place like Saudi Arabia where they keep the doors shut, and so when the British businessman comes along and says, 'I want to sell x million pounds worth of aircraft to the civil aviation authority,' you sort of scratch your head and say, 'Goodness, where do we start?' And, you know, with a bit of luck, you've got a bit of prior information but very often you've got to start from scratch.

MG: How did we get involved in the Al-Yamamah?

SL: We landed the deal because, although as I say all these difficulties exist, we were good at overcoming them. Well first of all we did the right thing and handled reasonably well the Kuwait Liberation War, which people normally call the First Gulf War. I say that with some hesitation because actually when there was a war between Iraq and Iran back at the end of the

late '70s, people called that the Gulf War, but now of course people talk about the Liberation of Kuwait as the First Gulf War. And the campaign to topple Saddam Hussein in April 2003 as the Second Gulf War. I'm rather slow at adapting to the terminology but that's how it is. So we were quite well in favour, as indeed were the Americans after that, though of course even that wasn't plain-sailing in Saudi Arabia. I mean that was the right thing to do in Kuwait, we were definitely in very good favour even when I was there years later in Kuwait but in Saudi Arabia it was of course a bit more doubtful because a lot of the religious people in Saudi Arabia were very doubtful indeed about having this large number of infidels in the Arabian peninsula. So that can't be taken as plain-sailing across all the population of Saudi Arabia, nevertheless in terms of the government we were in quite good odour. Of course I can't remember exactly, it was before my time, it was already in existence the Al-Yamamah deal by the time I got there.

As I said, when I was considering the posting we had a huge network of relations with Saudi Arabia and British people were working there on all kinds of projects, water projects, electricity projects, projects for this, projects for that, straight commercial deals and selling goods, all kinds of things. We sell a whole variety of stuff, education, teachers, you know the whole range. And so, British ministers and senior officials and British businessmen would come out to service, as it were, those arrangements and that relationship across the board. You know, we're talking about a major embassy, a big commercial section, a big defence section and a quite respectable political section, the whole works. I mention all this to put it in perspective because a lot of people in this country think that the only relationship we have with Saudi Arabia is selling weapons. And of course we haven't mentioned the oil business. Now the oil business itself, although Saudi Aramco is in a very significant way an American firm, they also employ a huge number of British engineers and then downstream from the oil business, the hydrocarbon business especially in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia also has a whole lot of British companies involved in it.

MG: At the time that you're there as Deputy Ambassador, how was the oil business and the oil prices, how was that situation playing out in Europe because when you were there earlier in the '70s, you were there at the time of what we called in the UK the oil crisis, where the prices were going up and you had the Sheikh Yamani appearing on TV almost nightly, so it had all calmed down, what was happening?

SL: Yes, I'm sorry, I'm not a good enough economic historian to recall exactly how the oil prices were, though I can remember, but again this is on paper at the FO, I can remember writing a report, with which incidentally David Gore-Booth later disagreed, but anyway, in which I wrote quite a careful economic report to London on the risks to the Saudi economy, at least the risks to Saudi government finances, so working back through my logic, I guess that must have been a time when the oil price was dipping and there was a risk, which of course has certainly happened since but I don't think happened then, a risk of the Saudi government funding going into deficit. You know, a country like this is not without economic and social problems because they're not very good - I mean it's very difficult, I should have more sympathy, they're not very good at using the money, the income from oil, to create job-creating-industries and you know the temptation is to build modern factories or modern things using hydrocarbons and these fancy factories go up which look very swish but inside you know they're all run by a bank of computers and you've invested half a billion pounds and you've created forty jobs and what Saudi Arabia hasn't been very successful at is developing the small and medium enterprise culture to create jobs for the large numbers, significantly large numbers of people coming out of their schools and universities and technical colleges, so that's why I say there are economic and social problems. I think these persist even now.

MG: Because, again, when you were there before they were just embarking on enormous expansion and modernisation, but you're saying they only took it up to a point?

SL: Well they were always tempted to put up these swish new factories which didn't create enough jobs, yes, and these investments were expensive and that's what the risk was, that this was going to take them into budgetary deficit.

MG: And you say it did in the end.

SL: Yes, I can't remember whether my forecast came true or not, whether or not David Gore-Booth agreed with it, but at that time, he was on leave and the commercial secretary and the economists in the embassy, we cobbled together this report to London, it went out over my signature because the ambassador was on leave but as I say he wasn't convinced that the argument stood up.

MG: Do they employ a lot of foreign labour?

SL: Oh yes, huge. I mean I can't remember the exact statistics but the population of Saudi Arabia is roughly perhaps 32 million, and perhaps 8 million are foreign.

MG: And why is that? Because their indigenous people don't want to do it?

SL: Well it's sort of grown and yes, to a large extent, the indigenous people, the native Saudi Arabians don't want to do some of these jobs done by foreigners.

MG: We have a similar situation apparently, here!

SL: Nothing like to the same extent.

MG: Yes, but you get that happening, I suppose, the more advanced you become. Or perhaps, I don't know, the more wealthy, I don't know. Would you say that it was a very happy time?

SL: Yes, I mean the problem with living in Saudi Arabia, working in that sort of job in Saudi Arabia, is dealing with the unexpected, you just don't know what sort of weird problem is going to turn up on your desk, and also you're constantly being asked how stable is this society and how stable is the regime; can the Al Saud, the ruling family, really hold it together? All the normal metrics that you use in other societies, more open societies, are not available to you. You know, you haven't got votes of no confidence in the House of Commons or in the parliament or critical articles in the press or demonstrations on the streets, all the signs that might suggest that a government is in danger are not available in Saudi Arabia, because there aren't votes in parliament, there aren't demonstrations, there isn't anything in the press, you know that sort of thing, and politicians aren't talking to you so you can't nip round to the House of Commons' bar so to speak, sorry I should say a pub in Westminster. What does a diplomat in London do? He makes an arrangement to see a member of the House of Commons over a pint in a pub in Westminster; that sort of thing doesn't happen in Saudi Arabia for obvious reasons. So, when a minister turns up and says over breakfast on the first day of his visit to the ambassador, 'How stable is this rule?' we didn't know the answer, or at least we thought we had an answer but we couldn't place one

hundred percent confidence in it. So that atmosphere of the unexpected was always there. And in social terms, you didn't know when there might be a bunch of expatriates who were having a ... expatriate women for example who had got an exercise class in their house and so all their cars would turn up outside a villa and suddenly one morning the *mutawwa'een*, the religious police would be there standing by the cars saying, 'What are you all doing?' And you didn't know what was acceptable and what was not acceptable.

MG: It's quite difficult for someone who hasn't experienced it to understand the reach of Islam in a country like that: the idea of religious police turning up as opposed to ordinary police and saying that you don't want infidels on the Arab peninsula, that kind of thing, it seems to be stronger than anything I can think of anywhere else.

SL: Yes, I think it probably is.

MG: And it must be quite limiting in a way?

SL: Well, it depends. Yes, of course it is limiting but you learn to live within those limits so there's no normal entertainment so you make your own; you find, if you're a musician, other people to play music and then you let it be known by word of mouth that you're going to give a concert in someone's villa or in the embassy on such and such a date, the embassy club will import films, so will all the expatriate compounds, where the expatriates live, they have ways of importing films. So you learn to, as I say, you learn to live within the limits.

MG: You were saying that in Czechoslovakia you knew when you went that there'd be listening devices in your property and all that kind of thing and people checking on you and I wouldn't have automatically have thought that might be the case going to Saudi Arabia but of course in a way, in a very different way, it would have been the case.

SL: Yes, I mean there were different limits. I don't think there were, there weren't the intelligence and security police watching over us in Saudi Arabia or at least nothing like to the same extent, they didn't follow you when we used to go camping in the desert and no one followed you on that sort of occasion. There might have been someone taking down our car numbers as we left Riyadh, I suppose: you went through a roadblock on the outskirts of Riyadh, but it wasn't onerous, it wasn't obstructive.

MG: I'm very in awe of your camping in the desert. I remember reading John Julius Norwich, who went and found it scary that it was so enormous that it made him feel claustrophobic in a curious way and so cold at night and he was quite destabilised by it. But you're obviously intrepid!

SL: Not especially! I don't think of myself as intrepid!

MG: I think you are! So were you ready for your return to the UK in '95.

### **Head of Know-How Fund for Central Europe, 1995-98**

SL: Yes, because I'd done two postings abroad and the normal pattern in those days and in fact through most of my career was two postings abroad, back in London, and then there was the question of what I should do next and various possibilities were considered, I can't remember the ones that didn't work, and then I went to head the Know-How Fund in central Europe.

MG: So you were going to come back to the Know-How Fund about how Czechoslovakia, as it then was, made the transition successfully to a plural economy.

SL: Yes, I'm afraid this is a question to which no one really knows the answer. Funnily enough, I was just talking about it with a Russian woman yesterday, why it is that the transition from the Soviet Union, communism, to a free market economy and a reasonably working system in politics hasn't worked in Russia and has, broadly-speaking, worked in most of the central European countries. Sorry, in all our discussion we passed over Yugoslavia but perhaps we'll come back to that. And I'm afraid again this is outside my real area, all I can say is that I started off working in the Know-How Fund: it was called the Joint Assistance Unit. It was joint because from quite an early stage it was a joint between the FCO and the Overseas Development Administration, as it then was, and then the '97 elections took place and Tony Blair's government created the Department for International Development, so we became two departments within DFID but with the same personnel as had been there before which was a mixture of FCO and DFID people. There were two departments, one which dealt with the former Soviet Union, and mine, which handled all the

countries in central Europe from the Baltics to Albania. And it was very exciting because we did some wonderful work. We had what would now be seen as a modest budget: even then it was not considered to be very large, about £40 million a year each for each of those two departments. And so we were not spending a lot of money per country, our budget for the Czech Republic for example was half a million pounds. We devised projects for helping the transition countries to become fully fledged parliamentary democracies and market economies. We did all sorts of projects and it's been well written up so I don't think that I need to go into detail.

MG: No, I just need to know how it struck you and your part in it.

SL: For the first time in my life I was managing a budget which was aimed at producing results. The reason it was called the "Know How Fund" was that it had no hardware in it at all, well I can't exactly say that, very occasionally if we were doing a project to create a stock exchange somewhere - we did a lot of stock exchanges because if you think about it you can't create a capital market, create a free market economy without a capital market - so we developed stock exchanges all the way across central Europe and so we might have a computer or some small amount of hardware to help run the project but we didn't, like the rest of DFID, build dams or plant forests or things like that. We didn't do things, we worked with people's minds and brains and, as I say, we could devise a project and see the results at the end of it. And in the end we would taper these projects into zero so that actually technically by the time I left that half million programme for the Czech Republic had gone to nothing.

MG: How many of you were there doing your half of Europe? Were you running a big department?

SL: It was quite big, it was bigger than most departments; if I'd been head of a comparable department in the FO, it was bigger than that, I suppose about thirty or forty people.

MG: And where were you? I mean, you weren't in the FCO?

SL: No we moved, we were initially in a building at the top end of Whitehall, very near Trafalgar Square, but not the old Admiralty building, the entrance was off Whitehall and then we moved to a building which was otherwise occupied by DFID in Victoria Street.

MG: And you were under Clare Short then at that time? All the way through?

SL: Yes, and in terms of atmospherics that's the only political comment I suppose I will make, which was, and this was very interesting, that Clare Short was to begin with deeply suspicious of what we were doing. First of all, she said that she had (and quite rightly by the way) a mission to spend DFID money on helping the poor and she said, 'The people you are helping are not poor.' And of course in terms of absolute poverty that was true: there were some poor people in the countries we were dealing with, but not nearly as many as in developing countries in, say, Africa and the Asian sub-continent. So we had to argue our case with her for this comparatively small amount of money when you consider some of the other aid programmes and we had to argue our corner and say, 'No, they're not poor in an absolute sense, we're not trying to claim that they're poor as people in Southern Sudan living on a few cents a day, they are poor in relative terms compared with the people that they compare themselves with in the rest of Europe,' and there were three main strands to the argument: that was the first, the second was that a relatively small amount of money will produce great effects, and the third was that if we get this right, then these countries will join the aid-giving community so the net benefit to the poor will be positive. And this indeed turned out to be the case for central Europe, less so with Russia as we know, but for central Europe, indeed I think we had one project, I think it may have been with the Czech Republic, which was a very small project, you know a few consultancy days, which was to give them advice on how to run an aid programme. Well it was fantastic: I thought that was what we're here for among other things. And the other problem that we had with Clare Short was her deep suspicion of the word and the embodiment of consultants. She would look at the daily rates, I mean they seem absurd by today's prices but anyway I'll tell you: so in my programme, we could hire an agricultural consultant because we had some projects for converting state-run agriculture communes to free market farms, so we could hire an agricultural consultant for about £400-£450 a day and for a project for example for privatising a Polish bank – we did a lot of privatisation of Polish banks – we could hire a merchant banker or a banker for about £800-£900 a day and a lawyer for, we didn't need very many lawyer days but we did need a few lawyer days, we could get a lawyer doing this kind

of work for about £1400 a day. And to Clare Short these amounts seemed absurdly extravagant, so we had to explain to her, “Well look, these consultants don’t work 365 days a year, you can’t multiply that figure and say they’re earning these hundreds of thousands of pounds, and they have other costs”. And then actually I worked out my own costs and you know by the time you took my salary plus my PA’s salary plus a notional amount for rent of an office in central London and divided by 220 or whatever it was, the number of days I worked per year, I was coming in at about £700 a day, so we had a bit of a presentation battle to win there, but we did because this was how we worked. Privatising a Polish bank, rough cost: £1 million, work over a year, so many days of bankers, small number of days of lawyers, employing quite a lot of local people on working out local problems, this is what the bill is and what do you get at the end? You get a privatised Polish bank, fantastic!

MG: Did you get on with her? Because I’ve spoken to other people, interviewed other people, they all spoke highly of her on the whole.

SL: Yes I did get on with her okay, I wouldn’t say it was better than okay, I think she’s a bit suspicious of the type of person I was, you know, I was public school and Cambridge background, I don’t think I was her sort of person but we got on fine, we travelled together, yes. I mean, I’m sorry I’m just talking about the personal. In professional terms, we got on absolutely fine, I had never any professional problems except as I say that we had a certain few hurdles to jump over, hoops to jump through, in order to persuade her that this was a type of project that was (a) worth doing and (b) had a home in DFID and it worked well in DFID because we made projects in exactly the same way as people made projects in Africa or other developing countries. They may have been building a dam or an irrigation project or whatever, we were privatising a Polish bank, but the method was exactly the same: a certain amount of British expertise, which you might hire, probably in Africa one person for four months to work there; we as I say did it by the day: someone would go out to Poland, to Warsaw, to do the deal with this bank for two or three days and then come back and then go out again a month later. So that was a bit different but by and large, you hire a certain amount of British expertise, a bit of design, some local workers – if you were doing it in Africa, quite a lot of local equipment, a few Land Rovers and stuff – we didn’t have that, as I say, but the method was very similar so it did belong in DFID.

MG: And it had very good outcomes, easily measurable.

SL: In central Europe. As we were saying earlier, less so in Russia. And I'd rather not go there because I just don't know enough about Russia. At the time, by the way, it seemed to be going quite well. And, for example, the Russian programmes, some really good programmes on land ownership because farmers couldn't, because the land had previously all belonged to the state, borrow on the security of their land to get new farming equipment so we did a lot of stuff on land reform, really.

MG: Some other people that I've interviewed didn't like the way that such a part of the FCO's budget went into the DFID, because that was part of the Tony Blair thing, and again I'm not trying to be political but I'm interested that you say that you had people from the FCO working in the Know-How Fund, as well as people from the other departments, so that seems to be rather harmonious.

SL: Well, I thought it was an essential part of the operation. We had to take some care, as the heads of department, that the cultural differences produced more pearls than grit but by and large that worked pretty well. It was probably the FCO people who had to adapt to the DFID way of working more than the other way around, so during my time, as we moved and did the geographical move from Whitehall to Victoria Street, we probably moved from being a joint, genuine joint department, which had started off life as a FO invention, to being ... you have more of a feeling that you are being seconded to DFID, in fact that's how I described that part of my life, as being a secondment to DFID. But I think that it was very important that we should have the FO element in there, because there were FCO people working in that department who knew central Europe, well as I did myself, I actually had that experience, which DFID people who'd been building projects in Africa all their lives were not really equipped for it.

### **High Commissioner, Brunei, 1998–2002**

MG: Your next posting is to a totally new place - in 1998, you became High Commissioner in Brunei. And that's a Commonwealth country, is it?

SL: Yes, that's why I was High Commissioner, rather than Ambassador.

MG: That's what I'm asking, as an amateur in these matters! It's the equivalent of being an ambassador but in a Commonwealth country.

SL: Exactly, that's what it is. And it may seem a bit odd to go off to South-East Asia, which was a culture that was quite new to me, but it fitted actually quite well: in fact I was the third Arabist in a row to have that job, my predecessors had been Adrian Sindall and Ivan Callan, who were both Arabic speakers, and I used to say, only half-jokingly, that the reason was that here again was another country, not Arab, but another country where you have the elements of Islam, autocracy and a closed society, in the same way as I was describing about Saudi Arabia, and oil.

MG: So quite similar.

SL: Yes, so that's probably where the similarities end. As I say, you know, culturally it's completely different.

MG: How big is it?

SL: The best comparison - they used to say before I went that it's the size of Norfolk, but I compare it more with Northumberland - it is in fact about the same size and the health budget is about the same. It's about 300,000 people and the reason why I compare it with Northumberland is that Bandar Seri Begawan, the capital, is about the same size as Morpeth, and everyone, most people, nearly all people in Brunei live on the coast and the coastal strip because the interior is jungle, well rainforest I should say to be more accurate, and it's also true of Northumberland that most people live on the coast and the interior is moorland and very sparsely-populated farmland. So a lot of the same things apply [as to an Arab state] - it's a closed society, it's run by the Sultan, the people who work for him and the ministers and the advisers are very loyal to him and give nothing away easily and it's difficult to find out what's going on and what buttons to press and so on.

MG: You've mentioned their financial disaster and Prince Jefri.

SL: Yes, so what had happened and again this is quite well-documented so I'll only give a very brief summary, what had happened was that the Bruneians have an oil-based economy,

the Bruneians themselves are very charming and undemanding people and so as long as the Sultan and his government give them roads which you can drive, hospitals where you can get cured, schools where you can get educated and the sort of basic infrastructure, electricity, water - there's lots of water of course from the sky, huge quantities – then they are more or less content. And so very significant surpluses of cash were going into something called the Brunei Investment Agency. And the head of the BIA was one of the Sultan's brothers, Prince Jefri, who was also Minister of Finance, and Prince Jefri decided that they should spend some of the money from the Investment Agency on investment in the country, spend some of the money on various things, various projects, a huge playground, literally playground, for adults and a huge expensive hotel with a big golf-course and other things. But he also, I'm sorry to say, spent a lot of this money on things for himself and his cronies and took cash out of the Investment Agency to invest in property of various kinds around the world and sometimes he would buy the property and set up a small company and put his cronies in charge of the company, so that this money, these properties were then used as security for further loans and other financial shenanigans. And the British got to hear about this but rather indirectly because a small number of British bankers were actually responsible for the asset management of the assets of the BIA, and I picked up some of this as I was preparing to go out there. Anyway, what happened was that there was a South Asian financial crisis in 1998 and – this was the story given to us – the Indonesian government asked the Sultan at some meeting of heads of government for a loan, sort of three or four hundred million US dollars, and the Sultan said, 'Yeah of course, no problem,' and got back home and said, 'Someone pass me the chequebook, I've promised a loan of three or four hundred million dollars to the government of Indonesia.' And they said, 'Your Majesty, I'm afraid the chequebook won't carry that,' and he suddenly realised, with no prior warning, that the Investment Agency still had assets but they were not liquid anymore and there wasn't any cash, or hardly any. So this financial crisis sort of affected the whole country and it turned out to be fascinating, all on a small scale. Nobody in this country took much notice of it but it was very important there and then it was important for the British for reasons which I'll tell you in a minute. So they realised that they needed to investigate what had happened because the assets from the BIA had sunk so low, and whether they could get any of this back. They brought in Arthur Anderson, who in my view did a very good job, they investigated the affairs of the BIA in a very detailed way and the stories that I heard were absolutely extraordinary, that they would open cupboards in the Agency's office and envelopes would fall out with cash in them and the whole accountancy system was shot to ribbons, or perhaps had never been set up. And

these Arthur Anderson people, of whom at one point there were a hundred working on this job which in Brunei terms was big, it was a very small society there, and they were a mixture of British, Australian and some Indian and they operated with the utmost discretion which was also quite a feat because Brunei was a very gossipy sort of place. The company, Arthur Anderson, very sensibly shipped them out of the country to some resort I think up the coast where they would spend the weekends when they got back from work so they weren't tempted to go to local parties and spill the beans. The beans were spilt to me because in all this the Bruneians hired someone, whose name I've forgotten, a policeman who had previously helped the Singaporean government look into the disaster of that British banker, Nick Leeson, who caused the collapse of Barings, and so this policeman was hired to supervise or watch over or work with the Arthur Anderson people and his brief was that he was allowed to talk to nobody except the British High Commissioner so he used to come to lunch with me once a fortnight, or once a month, and tell me these awful things that they were discovering. And I'm talking in these terms about Arthur Anderson because, afterwards, I mean towards the end of my time there, the affair broke which destroyed Arthur Anderson, forced it to break up into, well they separated off Accenture, but Arthur Anderson was brought by Enron.

MG: Enron, it was American, yes I know because I was thinking at the back of my mind you're speaking very highly of Arthur Anderson and I'm sure they aren't regarded very highly anymore so that's what happened then?

SL: Yes, this was a kind of reverse halo. Arthur Anderson, by this stage, their operation was beginning to close down in Brunei anyway because they'd sort of done their job and people said, 'Well these are terrible people, these AA folk,' and they refused to look objectively at the excellent job that they had done in this particular sector, which was sorting out the BIA. You know, they tracked down what had happened so that, as I say, this chain of hotels which Prince Jefri had bought in the US and then put in the hands of his cronies, they tracked down these people and got a lot of it back. And some of it was very funny, for example he had this idea of building a luxury hotel and the hotel in fact was built and a lot of the furniture and other equipment was bought for it, it was going to be called the Jerudong Park Hotel, so a lot of stuff was made with the initials JP, or JPH on them, and some various other sort of rather inappropriate statuary was also ordered and so a huge amount of this stuff was useless and Arthur Anderson arranged for some wonderful people, I can't remember their name, I think

I've got the catalogue somewhere, to come and do an auction. They were from Liverpool, their business was distress auctions, so when companies go bankrupt, these are the people you ring up to sell off all the physical assets and these guys, they were fantastic, they went through this awful warehouse, they collected all this stuff together in a grim warehouse somewhere and auctioned it all off, everything from the awful statuary to the wineglasses which, you know, Prince Jefri thought that his hotel was going to be extra-territorial and could sell alcohol so they had a whole lot of wineglasses which were completely useless.

MG: With the motif on?

SL: We went along to the auction and put our hands up, bid for some of this stuff! This firm from Liverpool, as I say, they did a fantastic job and brought in a bit of cash to put back into the Agency, not much from that auction but a bit, it took three days. So, you know, we should not allow our judgement of the iniquity of the Enron affair and wrongdoings elsewhere in the Arthur Anderson empire to cloud our judgement over what a very good job they did for the Bruneians. Right, so the way it affected me ... oh, I'll tell you one other anecdote because I don't think this is recorded anywhere. I was in my office one day and my secretary said, 'There's somebody from Christies who wants to come and see you,' I said, 'ok, that's fine,' and this guy arrived looking sort of a bit white and shocked and he was from the Impressionists Department of Christies. So I asked. "What are you here for?" And he said, 'Well they rang me up because Arthur Anderson, that is, rang me up because they'd found something which they thought I was the right person to judge it, to assess it.' And it turned out they'd discovered an Impressionist painting which Jefri had bought and they thought that it might be quite valuable and this guy, because he was the sort of expert that he was, recognised it immediately as a Manet that had been, as it were, lost to the world. Mostly, these famous paintings are known to the experts, they know exactly who's got them – they're in this museum or that private collection – but this one had disappeared. He said, 'We haven't seen this painting for fifteen years. And I go into this palace and there is this Manet, worth £30 million!' So this is the other sort of thing that Jefri had ... I mean, he did some awful things like he wanted to teach his son to play golf.

MG: Oh you've got to tell me about the son learning golf!

SL: He wanted to teach his son to play golf, so he hired Jack Nicklaus to come and stay in a hotel in Brunei for a month, heaven knows how much they must have paid Jack Nicklaus, even I, you know I'd have asked for a high fee to stay in a Brunei hotel, the hotel was really not very good, but to stay there for a month and have to teach Prince Jefri's son to play golf would be this kind of purgatory!

MG: What about the stables?

SL: So, this was again in Jerudong. Prince Jefri wanted to reintroduce polo which had been quite popular with the Sultan when he'd been younger, so he imported a lot of polo ponies, and also the equipment that went with them and this story was told me by the wife of one of the British officers who was living in Brunei, and I'll come back to the British presence. So this is the wife of an army officer who ran the British army's riding club, whatever it was called, and she had been summoned by an Arthur Anderson guy to the stables, with the promise of some equipment and she went in, you know she thought she'd died and gone to heaven, because she walked into this room, not very big just sort of twice the size of this room and with pegs on the walls, beautifully-equipped, I mean Jefri, when he did something, did it absolutely to the top standard, so these beautifully-equipped stables were there with lovely saddles and bridles and so on and so forth and the Arthur Anderson guy said to her, 'We've got to close the stables because they're not an asset, they're costing money to maintain the horses and no one's playing polo, these horses are sat there, so the trainer's been sacked, got to go home and we'll have to dispose of the horses – I'm not quite sure how that was done – and I need to dispose of all this equipment,' so she said, 'How much do you want for it?' Because this was going to be really useful for the riding club for the army officers and he said, I can't remember exactly the figure, he said, 'oh, £20' and she said, 'you mean £20 a saddle?' looking at the sort of row of saddles, and he said, 'No £20 for the lot, you take it away, you pay me £20 and it's done.' And for the Arthur Anderson guy, this was a problem solved, for her it was terrific. So these mad things went on but eventually the Sultan really did sort it out but it was very, very painful. I remember writing a telegram back to the FCO, at one point he had to, they were in court because the Sultan wanted to bring an injunction to stop Prince Jefri using certain bank accounts in the UK, to stop him draining any more money, put him on a monthly allowance, anyway it ended up in court in Brunei.

MG: It must have been very painful for him, it was his brother.

SL: And it was very painful because they'd been great mates when they were younger and Jefri was really his best friend and I think he felt personally betrayed. I say 'I think', I've no evidence for it because of course the Sultan wouldn't drop any hint of that to anyone outside his closest circle but it must have been the case. Anyway, the British interest, so we had, and again this is perfectly well-documented, a battalion of Gurkhas there, in Brunei, that's why the army people were there, but very shortly, at the beginning of that year – January 1998 – the Bruneians who wanted to expand their navy had signed a deal with GEC Marconi to buy three offshore patrol vessels and it was one of those deals of which we shouldn't be very proud, I suppose, because the Bruneians didn't need offshore patrol vessels, which were really small frigates, what they needed was something much smaller: well actually they wanted genuine, real offshore patrol vessels, in other words something about half the size which could go into shallow water and just patrol offshore, but they were very rich, they could afford it and we sold them these three vessels at a price of about £750 million, which was a lot of money in those days, and the relationship was all very good, everyone was all very happy and the Queen visited a month before I arrived, in October 1998, so my predecessor got a KCVO and you know it was all very friendly, very wonderful, and a month after the Queen visited, the Sultan, on the advice of his advisors, wrote a letter saying 'We can't afford these vessels, we'll have to cancel the contract' because of these financial problems. And that was the atmosphere in which I arrived, dreadful! So you know the first part of my mission there, as I say, was to explain to the Bruneians, 'Well GEC Marconi do make good ships but, whether or not they make good ships, they certainly make good contracts and if you cancel this contract you will find that you still have to pay £750 million and you'll get no ships, so actually we need to sit down and think about this.' It was a very difficult task actually, but we did it by some careful negotiation. GEC Marconi were then bought by BA Systems. One of the reasons why GEC Marconi had no option but to go through the contract was this: GEC Marconi are not actually shipbuilders, they're very good at electronics and so on, but they're not shipbuilders, so the day, or the week that they'd signed the contract with the Bruneians they'd immediately signed sub-contracts with other companies, so they themselves had liabilities and they couldn't afford just to cancel, well they couldn't afford to allow the Bruneians just to cancel and it wasn't as though, even though there had been a counter-deposit and they could have accepted £100 million in place, they couldn't even afford, couldn't accept 10% or whatever it was of the deal because the whole thing, pretty well, was sub-contracted. Anyway, it was all very clever. BA Systems

took off some of the gold-plating of the contracts, they still had these large hulls, large ships, too big for the Bruneians really and they reduced the fancy gold-plating on the contracts. HSBC were very clever with a good financing deal and in the end, by the time I left, the Bruneians had accepted that, well long before that because I came back for the launch of the first ship, and the ships in the end were all built, they were not I think finally delivered because the Bruneians then decided that actually they couldn't manage the ships, they paid for them, all that went through successfully but they couldn't manage the ships and so they were not in fact delivered and were sold somewhere else on the market.

MG: Well, winding down now for today, but what about your life there, you've explained that it's on the coast, you've explained that you've got rainforest behind you, I mean is it a riot of azaleas and wonderful plants, lovely gardens, what was your house like?

SL: Oh yes we had a very nice house with rainforest right behind, so wonderful views of the rainforest behind and you really felt you were on the edge of nature. I mean, one day for example, I was working in my study before breakfast and our housekeeper had put the breakfast out on the veranda. I got up, I was too long in my study, by the time I got up to the veranda, a bunch of monkeys had come down from the trees, stolen all the fruit and left the banana skins everywhere and run off!

So yes you felt you were pretty well in the wild. On one side, we had a nice view down to the sea but up behind the house, on the hill behind, was this rainforest and I learnt a bit about rainforest but I'm not very good on botany and plants and I probably didn't make as much of that side of things as I could have done if I'd had different interests. I mean, the rainforest there really is quite aggressive. I used to joke that you couldn't park your car for too long, something would have grown over it, it's not quite true but not far off. Our recreations there, for a while we were part-owners of a boat, a motorboat, and we would buzz off to islands offshore, spend the day out and anchor the boat and go swimming and stuff. We did go to the rainforest: there was a nice enclave of Brunei up the coast called Temburong which had places which would educate you on the rainforest and we took Prince Edward there when he went and Princess Sophie came to visit. We had a lot of big education projects there with CFBT, the Centre for British Teachers; they had a big project there, they still do, I became involved at CFBT later as a trustee and it was a mixture, a certain amount of commerce.

MG: What social life did you have?

SL: Well, you see it's a very small expatriate community, there were nice diplomatic friends we had and a bit of contact with Bruneians. Bruneians, they were funny in one respect, they were warm and friendly in lots of ways but they never invited us to their homes except on the big Muslim festivals where you were expected to call and we had this extraordinary custom of going round. I spent three days calling on everybody, starting with the Sultan and then going all the way through the ministers, you'd go to all the members of the Cabinet, to their homes and have to have, you know, ghastly jelly-like things in bright colours – yellow, green.

MG: What, sweet?

SL: Yes. And sticky lemonade and then go on to the next one. Visit forty houses in a day, it was a completely extraordinary system but that was what they did, on *hari rayah*, the two Muslim festivals. They spoke very good English, nearly all the Cabinet had been to British universities, usually minor universities but British universities, and spoke very good English except for the Minister of Religious Affairs and the Chief Mufti who had been at Al-Azhar University in Cairo. So although I learned Malay, I found it very difficult to learn Malay before I went there, I hardly used it at all, very seldom used it professionally, unlike Arabic which in Arab places I used all the time, and the languages I needed were English and Arabic, oddly enough, because I spoke English with the members of the Cabinet and the Sultan and I spoke Arabic with the Chief Mufti and the Minister of Religious Affairs.

MG: Because of their education, that's extraordinary. And it's exclusively Islamic is it? No Buddhism or ...?

SL: No, they're very tolerant people, so the Malays are all Muslim, and run the government and then just under 20% of the population are Chinese and they pretty well run the commerce, so there are various Chinese religions and also some Christians, and there's a small church there, two small churches.

## Ambassador to Oman, 2002-05

MG: Today is the 30<sup>th</sup> April and Stuart Laing is recalling his time as Ambassador in Oman for the Diplomatic History Project. The year is 2002. What does that bring to mind?

SL: Well, it is of course a year or so after, it's April 2002 isn't it, and it's a year and a bit after the Twin Towers, then the campaign that was launched by the allies to get rid of the Taliban from Afghanistan. And of course the big political question at the time was Iraq, all of this is very well-recorded, and so I needn't relate all that sort of stuff, but it was in the time when the Neocons in the States were advising Bush to go ahead with the campaign to get rid of Saddam Hussein. In other words, to complete the job that hadn't been done after the recovery of Kuwait, after the liberation of Kuwait. So, all this was the political background and we were very much involved in that because the allies, which meant principally the British and the Americans, but also included quite a large coalition, were keen to get all the Arab countries on board as they wound up to the process that eventually led to the campaign of April 2003, the regime change campaign to dislodge Saddam Hussein. We tend to forget that actually all the Gulf Cooperation Council, the six GCC countries, all offered support in different ways and part of my job ... Of course a lot of ambassadors at the time were pretty unhappy about all this process because we weren't consulted until pretty well the deed was done, that is to say that Bush and Blair had decided that this was what they wanted to do, and it was decided to mount a campaign, I won't go through all the stuff that we went through, the Security Council during the latter months of 2002, that's all very well recorded. But, and I suppose this will be in the record too but I can't remember the exact dates, at some point I was instructed, as of course my colleagues were in other GCC and other Arab countries, to go in and talk to the Sultan, talk to our respective governments, in my case the Sultan about what was to happen. And the Sultan was also pretty unhappy about it, not actually for the same reasons as the political objections, for example in this country or indeed elsewhere. The Sultan's objections, if I recall correctly, I suppose this would be in my reporting telegram, but as I recall it the Sultan's objections to the proposed coalition campaign to get rid of Saddam Hussein, using the territories of the GCC countries from which to mount this attack, were that it would cause a severe disruption in Saudi Arabia. What I mean by that is that there had been some objection even in 1991-2, when the Kuwait liberation campaign had taken place, that all these infidel troops were traipsing across the desert in Saudi Arabia and there's a certain brand of conservative Muslims who believe that the whole territory of the Arabian

peninsula is in some way sacred ground. I must say I personally haven't been able to find either Quranic or *hadith* confirmation of this but anyway it is a belief among some, so the Sultan, Sultan Qaboos was sensitive to this, thought that if we had another 500,000 troops, as had been the case in the Kuwait campaign, using Saudi Arabia as a base to attack Iraq, that the Al Saud, the Saudi royal family, would find themselves the subject of political attack within Saudi Arabia and would lose their power to control extremist Islamists in Saudi Arabia. He, Sultan Qaboos, was not really proved right in this as it turned out, there wasn't too much objection: there was some but it wasn't catastrophic for the Al Saud, but it was an interesting reflection of Sultan Qaboos's concern that the stability of the Arabian peninsula depended to quite a large extent on the stability of the Al Saud as the ruling family of Saudi Arabia. He told me stories that didn't reflect very favourably on the Al Saud, but nevertheless he seemed to accept that they were a force that kept the peninsula in some form of stability.

MG: You obviously had a good personal relationship with him. Had you known him before?

SL: Well perhaps I should have said this, perhaps, go back a bit. The position of the British Ambassador in Oman at that time, and it had gone back obviously before me and I think was continued for some time after me, was that to put it crudely the British Ambassador was the number one Ambassador and so I was able to have one-to-one chats with the Sultan in a way that virtually no other ambassador could do. I won't say absolutely none, I mean I suppose he had chats like that with the American Ambassador, depending on how well his personal relations ... these things are very personal very often. But I could manage usually about three times a year, and I would need some sort of flimsy excuse like I'm going back to London for such-and-such a conference or meeting, I will be seeing ministers and I'm sure Your Majesty would like me to carry messages back to ministers and bring back messages to you afterwards if necessary, and this would be a cue so to speak for him to give me usually quite a long time, about an hour and a half or two hours, just one-to-one. I remember on one occasion it was quite amusingly embarrassing, because another ambassador was waiting to see him and I don't know how they decided what order to take us but anyway he took me before this other ambassador, he was Bangladeshi, I'm not sure ... and the Bangladeshi ambassador clearly thought that I'd have sort of ten-fifteen minutes and I kept him waiting, I'm sorry to say, for an hour and a half or two hours while the Sultan and I went over the ground because there was always a lot to discuss. The other feature of being ambassador

there, if I'm speaking very generally, was that the Sultan's writ really does run through the Cabinet system and the Civil Service, so if there was a subject on which we needed Omani support, and if I could get the Sultan to agree to it, then pretty well everything ran smoothly, everyone further down the system would say 'His Majesty wants it and so this is how it's going to be' but they were quite clever about this, that is to say, if there was something where they didn't want us to have what we wanted, and there were a couple of examples, then, they would somehow contrive for the Sultan not to give his approval and then we'd have to battle through the normal channels, as any other ambassador would have to do. But, by and large, as I say I can remember only two exceptions, when we didn't get our way on something important and then that was because, or connected with the fact that the Sultan hadn't given his prior approval.

MG: Would it be indelicate to ask what they were?

SL: No, I don't think so. Well, one of them certainly there's no secret about: one was about the airports ... I mean, I still think the Omanis were wrong.

MG: You mention the BAA in the notes – is this the airport contract?

SL: Yes, so what happened was that this was, I thought, a sort of *fait accompli* by the time I arrived as ambassador whenever it was – April, 2002. And what had happened was that actually very soon after, I think the day after the Twin Towers incident, the Omanis had signed with - there'd been sort of negotiations of course before - BAA a contract for the upgrading of the Omani, the Muscat airport, it's a place called Seeb, it's called Seeb International Airport. It turned out, as the contract went on, that the Omanis were not happy with the way BAA were tackling it, and the reason, to put it a little bit simply and crudely, was this: that first of all BAA had looked at the projections of tourism and other traffic, air-traffic figures for the coming 10, 15 years and, not surprisingly as a result of the Twin Towers incident, the projections all showed considerably lower figures than the earlier figures, on which the original contract had been based. So BAA said, "OK, we'll delay the upgrading of the airport, because you don't need an airport to manage x million passengers per year, when actually there are going to be x minus 2 million passengers a year, or half x maybe." And the other thing was that BAA, as we all know from going through British airports, on the whole don't build whacking great huge new terminals. A lot of the way of

upgrading airports is done by closing off a bit of a terminal, improving it, opening it up and carrying on. There's often work going on in any of our airport terminals, and the Omanis hadn't quite realized that this was the approach being adopted with regard to Seeb International Airport. In other words, they were going to upgrade the existing terminal bit by bit, keeping one or two or three steps ahead of the projected passenger throughput: they were not going to build a beautiful, expensive, brand-new terminal in a different location. The Omanis thought this was really not prestigious enough, they didn't like the idea, and decided they would build a beautiful new terminal in another location, which they have done, but only opened it less than a year ago, six months ago or something. In other words, if they had stuck to the BAA plan, they would have had effectively a new terminal or a renewal of the old terminal I should say, within four or five years, a couple of years after I had left, so 2006. As it is, it's not until 12 years later they've got their new terminal, it's been incredibly expensive. So that's one thing. The other thing was that a scheme for constructing a staff college and even at the time it was still a little bit difficult to find out exactly what they didn't like about it, but I thought it was a good project, I completely believed in it. The principal contractor was going to be Serco on the British side and Bahwan on the Omani side. I had the feeling that it was a kind of anti-Bahwan, the Bahwans were not always a popular company, very big, the two brothers had different consortia of companies but they weren't always popular in the Omani business circles and in the end someone managed to torpedo this particular contract. But again, this was not one that we had approval from the Sultan for. Whereas, when we come to Kuwait, very much the opposite. In Kuwait, you could have something which had been approved by the top people, either the Emir or the PM, who were both from the Al Sabah ruling family, but that was no guarantee that such-and-such a project was going to succeed. For example, there was quite a valuable project to improve the British Challenger tanks, which they had in their army, and soon after I arrived, within weeks of my arrival, I was present at a breakfast and there were only six of us there, so there was no grand-standing, the PM, myself and the PM's private secretary, Blair this was and the [Kuwaiti] PM, who three weeks later was the Emir, and two of his people. And Shaykh Sabah gave an assurance to the PM [Blair] that this contract for the renewal of these tanks, a lot of extra steel on them, would go through, and we never got it, it was never clinched. And after that time, people in the army and others, would sort of just stick their spanners in the works and clog up the system. Anyway, this was just contrary to the way the Omani system worked.

MG: But, from your notes, you obviously did some very big deals: British Gas and Steady Trade you say and the Dry Dock ..?

SL: They actually would go into maturity after my time.

MG: But they must have been negotiated during your time.

SL: Yes, the Omanis continued to have a closer relationship with Britain and I don't like using the word relationship in talking about international affairs, because I think people do things for reasons of interest rather than for a relationship, nevertheless the Omanis believed in putting big and important contracts the British way on a number of occasions. And they're very nice people, you know, it was a lovely job to have.

MG: Well I was going to ask, because I know you said when you were thinking of going to Czechoslovakia that your wife had been happier at the idea of being in an Arab country because she found it was freer than it would be in a communist country, so what was the society like in Oman? I got the impression in Saudi Arabia, certainly the first time, that you were much more in an encampment, almost, that you weren't in the main swing the first time you were there ...

SL: Well, it was difficult to build relationships, friendships I mean, with Saudi nationals, yes, especially difficult if you wanted, as we preferred to do, if you preferred to have a friendship involving males and females together. I mean you have to tread a little bit carefully in Oman but on the whole those kinds of constraints don't operate and we were able to have a number of friendships with Omanis, where we knew the couples pretty well. And sometimes there'd be events which were men-only and other times women-only, but we did quite a lot with the genders together and we enjoyed that and we could make genuine friendships with the Omanis as well as with the expatriates.

MG: And you were living in the Embassy, presumably, in Oman, so you weren't in a kind of diplomatic village with your own shops and things?

SL: Yes and no. No, I wasn't living in the Embassy. The Ambassador's Residence was actually, and is, about 20 minutes' drive from the Embassy. The Omanis had done a deal

with us, some years before – 1993 I think roughly or a little before – what had happened was that the British Embassy, which included the ambassador’s house, the offices and the Ambassador’s Residence and I think a couple of other residences, were in old Muscat Town, the actual town of Muscat, which is quite small. When we say Muscat now, actually what we mean, what most people really mean is the capital area which is huge, several miles long, quite long and thin, but Muscat Town itself is very small and the Sultan wanted to build a new palace on the area which was partially occupied by the British Embassy. They negotiated with us, I think Douglas Hurd was Foreign Secretary, and the deal was that the Sultan would buy from a cousin of his some land on which to build a British Ambassador’s Residence and would also allocate some land in an area which is not exactly a diplomatic quarter on the Saudi model, on the Riyadh model, but was an area where there were several embassies next to each other and allocate some land to us there and give us a generous chunk of money. When I arrived everyone was very hush-hush about this [the money grant], so there was a great secret, but as I was clearing out some old papers in the Embassy, in the offices one day, I came across a British Parliamentary Paper in the Treaty Series, do you know what I mean? In the old days, maybe still nowadays, when an international treaty was concluded between the British government and another government, they would publish a white paper or a little paper with the text, and all this text is out there in the public domain of how much money the Sultan gave us to build a new Residence and a new Embassy on these two bits of land which we’d been allocated. I’m afraid I can’t remember what that sum of money was, anyway it’s in the public domain so it doesn’t really matter. Anyway, the result was that we had a very nice Embassy built brand-new in the early 1990s; the Embassy compound included an Embassy building, three or four houses for the Deputy Head of Mission and two or three other officials, a club, a tennis court, a swimming pool, a squash court and smaller housing for some local engaged staff, and – separately – this fantastic house for the Ambassador with a lovely outlook over the sea. So the Ambassador and his family had a wonderful place to live and the offices worked pretty well too and this was all down to the generosity of the Sultan effectively.

MG: You’ve mentioned some names – Erik Bennett and Tim Landon. Where do they fit in?

SL: This is, I’ve got to be a little bit careful what I say here because this is a little bit sensitive and it will appear in the record eventually when these papers are released. The Sultan had, and still has, a number of advisers: Omani and other, Omani advisers, and the one who really

had the key to the door was a guy called Omar Zawawi and he was sometimes a bit awkward but on the whole helpful and very close to the Sultan, probably spoke to the Sultan on the telephone twice, three times, twice a day. Once actually the Sultan rang up when I was with Omar Zawawi; but he also had British advisers, one of whom was Erik Bennett, who had been previously working in the Air Force of King Hussein of Jordan and had then been recruited to Oman on the advice of King Hussein, I believe, I was told, recruited by the Sultan of Oman to create, really, the Omani Air Force, which he did. I don't think he was a very senior officer either in the RAF or in the Jordanian Air Force at the time but he came across and sorted out, as I say created, the Omani Air Force. Then bred it up and bred up the next generation of commanders, including the next commander of the Omani Air Force. He told me, Erik, that the Sultan had wanted him to be commander of the Air Force, possibly even Chief of Defence Staff, but Erik had said no, no this should be done by an Omani and he was quite right, the Omanis were ready to do that by then. So Erik stayed on, he lived in a not a very grand house, not far from Seeb, a little bit north and west of Muscat, of the main capital area and used to invite me, I mean not me personally, he used to invite the British Ambassador to go and have lunch from time to time. He was quite close to the Sultan, not as close as Omar Zawawi but he was pretty close to the Sultan and he was a very valuable interlocutor for me because he would give me a lot of the flavour of what was behind the Sultan's decisions or what was behind the Sultan's thinking and I have to say I found these discussions really very useful. Erik Bennett is not everyone's cup of tea but I found him very good company and we had some delightful and very informative lunches. He also had, if this is material, very good taste in claret and when I went for lunch we used to have some very good wine, except during Lent, but I gave up alcohol during Lent as well so if we had one of these lunches in Lent, we just drank water. And Erik Bennett organized a, what he called, somewhat pretentiously but what the hell, a "privy council", so he managed to invite once a year between Christmas and New Year, it was always round about that time, a group of British people to have a sort of long night session, late-night session with the Sultan, where they would talk about the world and the Sultan clearly found this very useful and the people, the sort of people who were involved, were - I am going to fail to remember their names now - anyway, two retired Chiefs of Defence Staff, who would come and they would talk, sort of, global politics with the Sultan. And then the next night, Omar Zawawi would give a dinner to which I was usually invited, which was very nice. Zawawi would see these people and get a bit of a debrief on what they'd talked about. Meanwhile, in another part of the wood, there was this other adviser, Tim Landon. Tim Landon was very different, he was army, he's died

now. He had been with the Sultan in Salalah at the time of the coup in July 1970 and quite close to the Sultan, to Qaboos, I think even then and certainly had helped him in the coup to throw out his father. The Sultan had later made him his ADC, so he'd been adviser to the Sultan as a kind of military adviser for a very long time and he then later went into business, he grew extremely rich and there are books criticizing the way in which he got rich: two books by this fellow John Besant, so I don't need to repeat all those rumours because they're all written down. But he became very well off and bought a wonderful estate in Hampshire where he once invited Sibella and me to lunch actually. He organized something a little bit similar to Erik Bennett's privy council, but focused on economic affairs, with some top-level bankers and would get them along once a year to talk to the Sultan. What I'm saying is that behind the scenes there were these two networks and there may well have been other networks which I'm not conscious of, where people were giving advice to the Sultan, from top-levels of British business and politics and public affairs and army.

MG: But these two that you mention, they'd been out with the Sultan for so long, they were advising him from his point of view, they weren't really acting for the British, were they?

SL: I think Erik Bennett would say that he saw that British and Omani interests were convergent in the sort of areas that he was interested in talking about. No, I think, certainly Erik Bennett was really quite patriotic actually in lots of ways and thought very strongly about British interests. Tim Landon, perhaps a bit less so, but I think again he saw convergence of British and Omani interests in bringing together these people with the Sultan.

MG: Now I hadn't realized that both of those had a military background, but you've mentioned military relationship and Loan Service personnel, so how does that work? Was there an interchange between our armed forces and theirs?

SL: Not exactly interchange, but a very close relationship. For a long time, the British have had a very strong what's called "Loan Service presence" in Oman. This is all very well-documented, but in my time about 60 or 70 British officers and NCOs were on secondment to the Omani Armed Forces, wearing Omani uniform and being paid as Omani, well, no that's not quite true because they were still paid by the British, but their salaries and additional allowances were reimbursed to the British Ministry of Defence and in fact I say they were paid by the British, they were paid, but they also received a considerable enhancement to

their actual salaries. About half of these were Army and a quarter Navy and a quarter RAF. The head of it was a British Army person, of Major-General rank, and he was given a house by the Sultan really quite close to ours so they were very close personal friends, the British Army commander and his wife.

MG: What was their function? Was it a training one, an advisory one, a combination?

SL: No, training and advice, yes. The Senior British Loan Service Officer, this major-general, described himself to me more than once as a kind of inspector-general of the forces, so he could pop in anywhere in any of the forces, not just the Army, and have a look at them and then report to the Sultan, but he was reporting to the Sultan, he was not reporting to the British MoD. I had a Defence Attaché, who of course reported to the MoD.

MG: Did they have a navy? You said it was 25% Navy personnel ...

SL: Yes, yes, quite a decent navy. I mean, not very big, but you know it's an important Indian Ocean state, and Arab Gulf, but mainly Indian Ocean, and a very strong maritime tradition. Well they had all this ... read my books! They had these colonies all the way down East Africa, the Sultan of Muscat in 1840 moved his court to Zanzibar because he was earning more from his Zanzibar possessions than from his Muscat possessions. They had a mini-empire, it's got maritime strength, yes. And trading with India, of course.

MG: You've gone there after the Twin Towers, before the invasion of Iraq, and it says you had quite a lot of visitors: royal, military and political. Why was that? Was it connected with approaching war?

SL: No, not really. I mean, it would have been one or two ... because, before the campaign of April 2003, the Omanis agreed to give support to the campaign by allocating us some sort of - I'm not sure what the technical term is, it's when aircraft practise bombing, bombing range actually. Effectively in the desert. In fact, we didn't use it because the campaign, there was something funny about the timing of the campaign, I think it was brought forward because the British forces and the American forces realised that if they left it until June, it would be too hot for the tanks or something like that, so that's why it took place in April when it was a bit cooler, so in fact the offer was never taken up. But Oman at that time was the base for ...

up until that campaign you recall that we were operating two no-fly zones over Iraq, that the British ran a no-fly zone over Southern Iraq from airbases in Bahrain and Qatar and the Americans operated a no-fly zone over the North, from bases in Turkey. The British effort from Bahrain and Qatar was supported by surveillance aircraft which flew out of Oman, so this was a more or less continuous operation.

MG: What was it like to be there when the war broke out?

SL: We were not directly concerned because there were no troops or aircraft, except for these surveillance aircraft, what are they called?

MG: The Nimrod?

SL: It was the Nimrod, that's right. The Nimrods were flying out of Oman. So we had very good reports on the conduct of how the campaign was going, we had daily briefings from the Defence Attaché and we, I'm afraid, observed it from afar.

MG: I've heard recently some of the people involved talking about how, when they went into Basra, they were feted as being liberators but then it kind of turned sour because we didn't, they didn't, have the sort of infrastructure and they couldn't put it in straight away and I just wondered if the Omanis showed any interest of any kind, one way or another?

SL: Not so much.

MG: So who were these other people? The royals, for example? Was that trade or was it ..?

SL: Yes, trade, and because of the history and the relationship and they like coming. I'm sorry I haven't got a list of them here but you know we had a number of visits from senior people, especially from the royal family, some military, and some ministers, not so many ministerial visits, I've forgotten ... Jack Straw came, I remember, I went out to the desert with him, the Sultan was in the desert at the time.

MG: Was he Foreign Secretary then?

SL: Yes.

MG: And you've said that you had Tony Blair out at one stage?

SL: No, that was in Kuwait.

MG: Oh, I beg your pardon, right, yes.

SL: We had a terrific visit with the Prince of Wales, when he came, I mean that was terrific fun because, first of all, we knew the Prince of Wales from Cambridge and Sibella, my wife, was quite close to him, and he was godfather to our eldest son, so that sort of relationship. As it happened, the visit was over a weekend, including a Friday and a Saturday. I think it was four days: Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, something like that and, certainly on the Friday, the Omanis said, 'Well you can organise that, we'll supply any transport you need, but you can organise that.' This was fantastic for us because we did a lot of camping in the desert and we knew the Omani desert really well, we knew what was attractive and interesting to go to. We took HRH to a couple of our favourite spots, and the places we normally went to by Land Rover, but would have taken too long so we cheated and went partly by helicopter. We went on quite a long walk up one particular wadi, and a couple of hours, two or three hours walking up and down with the Prince, you know, and Omani security people arrived but no Sultan or anyone like that.

MG: But then did you have a banquet with the Sultan?

SL: Oh yes. Of course less formal things too, which were actually more fun in some ways and the Sultan invited Sibella and me to stay in his palace Beit al Baraka, the Prince was staying as well and I remember one particular, one of these extraordinary occasions that happens in your life every now and again, anyway so the day's programme had been done. The Sultan is very much a night bird, he likes doing things at night, as I implied earlier when these chats would take place, so after the day's programme, we, I don't know why there hadn't been an evening meal, anyway, we were invited to have supper with the Sultan, so the four of us sat down: the Sultan, the Prince of Wales, Sibella and me in Beit al Baraka, in the palace. I suppose we must have finished at one o'clock, something like that, the Sultan said 'Oh we'll walk round the palace.' So we walked round and he sort of showed us his

collections of various things, all sorts of interesting things. I remember one particular, sort of, I think it was 18<sup>th</sup> century, anyway it was very ancient, old British mechanical, a kind of mechanical dolls' house which you could push a button and various things, doors and stuff would open in the dolls' house, absolutely extraordinary. Then we arrived in a big room and there was a big, black piano in one corner of it and the Sultan, who knew I was a musician, said 'Come on, play us something Ambassador.' So I found myself in this extraordinary position of having to play bits of music on the piano for the Sultan and the Prince at 1:30 in the morning in Muscat, really quite weird. And I'll tell you one other Omani anecdote, then I think we'd better go on to Kuwait. Another thing that His Majesty used to do, because this may not be recorded, not because it was a secret or anything but it's just the sort of thing you don't bother to record in diplomatic writing, was that he used to invite us to his New Year's Eve party, and this was really an extraordinary event. Only two Ambassadors were invited: the British and the American, and about half the Cabinet and the top military people and one or two people like Omar Zawawi and top advisers and then a group of British, mainly British, guests. Alan Duncan, MP, then MP, later he was knighted, isn't he now a minister?

MG: Is he a diminutive chap, I think I know who you mean?

SL: Yes, he is quite small. He used to come quite often and a couple of military people, Lord Guthrie, Charles Guthrie, would come. Gosh, who else? One year William Hague came, but not while I was there. So a few sort of top politicians, I've got a lovely picture here of Alan Duncan and the Sultan and me ... I like to call it 'Men in Skirts' because Alan Duncan and I are both in kilts and the Sultan, of course, is in his long robes.

MG: So what's your tartan then?

SL: Mine is Gunn tartan and I can't remember what the Duncan one is. So we would be invited at 8:30 and we'd be offered alcohol, actually, which you had to be very careful about because, for me anyway and for some other people, alcohol makes you go to sleep over a long evening, and that would go on for about an hour and a half, so you could mix with the [Omani] Cabinet and the other British visitors and so on. Then, they would announce that His Majesty had arrived, and he would stand at the door, we would shake hands with him and then go through the door and then outside to a place where the tables were all laid up under cover, but no side walls and there was a band over there, and the Sultan had beside him the

menu and also the list of pieces of music that were going to be played and if the band didn't play a piece of music well enough, he would call over one of his major domo fellows and tell them to play it again, make sure they got it right. Then, having sat down, we would then be invited to go down to the buffet, where a very lavish buffet was set out, and we would go back and have our meal, and then it was time for sweet, and then the Sultan would go down and he would cut a cake, a huge cake ... they had a lot of other fruit and other delicious things but he would cut the cake and I couldn't make out what was going on, he would cut the cake, put it on your plate and say 'You know, you're not going to have that bit' and you'd be given a clean plate and he'd cut another bit of cake, and say 'Yes, that's alright, you can have that,' so you'd take a bit of cake not understanding what was going on and put some fruit salad or something beside it, go back to your place and then you realise that the reason for this was that, in the cake, a bit like my parents used to do, well lots of people do, with Christmas pudding, there were little pretty things. But, in the case of the Sultan's cake, the pretty things were gold sovereigns, gold sovereigns are actually quite small and the reason why he had not allowed the first slice of cake was that he could tell there was no sovereign in that one, he wanted to make sure that you got one. So anyway, the meal would finish about 1:00, or 1:15, but we hadn't finished yet. We would then be ushered into a concert hall, and his orchestra would then give a classical music concert, starting at 1:30, so there was tendency for the British people who were, you know, not used to this sort of thing, to get a bit sleepy by this stage. On one occasion, the Sultan, obviously a bit irritated actually, noticed that a senior politician, well I think it was William Hague, was going to sleep and cut short the programme, which obviously was not what he had planned to do. But anyway, you tried to survive that, stay awake and the programme wasn't terribly long, it was usually a bit less than an hour, about 50 minutes ... And at 2:30 or so you would be allowed to go home! But that was how to celebrate New Year's Eve!

MG: That really is a marathon! So I detect that he had a musical ear, you know, with the piano – he was a very keen musician.

SL: Yes yes, very keen.

MG: Did he play anything?

SL: No, I don't think he played.

## Ambassador to Kuwait, 2005–08

MG: Can I just ask you – you go from there to Kuwait. Now, isn't that a little unusual, not coming back to London first?

SL: I suppose so. I think, I mean I wasn't unique in this. There are some people who are better at abroad and some people who are better at Whitehall and I was definitely better at abroad and I wasn't particularly attracted by ... I'm not sure if there were any available, jobs in London and so I applied for Kuwait and got it and was very happy to go there. The Omanis, by the way, couldn't understand it. They didn't, don't like the Kuwaitis much and they couldn't understand why I would be interested in moving from Oman to Kuwait, but actually it was in lots of ways very interesting: a bigger embassy and more difficult because the Kuwaitis were more awkward customers than the Omanis as I have described before, and in military terms, political terms, it was more interesting because at that time we had by now, what year am I talking about, end of 2005, we had 4000 troops in Basra and a big embassy in Iraq and there were various things that resulted from that. The main thing was that all of their supplies and personnel came through Kuwait, everything, even water, I mean drinking water, I love to point out the irony that Iraq, with the two biggest rivers in the region, was importing water from Kuwait, which has no water. But that was how it was. So three times a week, a huge convoy was lined up at dawn or just before dawn on the motorways outside Kuwait and loaded up with food, water, everything that the troops needed – ammunition, material, weapons, people and everything that was needed in Basra for the troops or for the Embassy in Baghdad was driven out of Kuwait. So the job of ambassador was, as much as anything else, I mean apart from promoting British trade and other British interests in Kuwait, the job of ambassador was also one of maintaining a political relationship which would make sustainable the supply of our troops and our embassy in Iraq. And during that time, a number of British military visitors would come through Kuwait and also I saw more of the British PM, first of all Blair and then Brown in that job than I had in the rest of my career put together. And it was partly because of the timing that very often they would do a morning's work in London, go out to Heathrow or some British airport, fly to Kuwait, five or six hour flight, three or four hours' time difference and arrive at 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening British time, 11 o'clock or so at night Kuwait time. If they were staying with us, which they very often were, they'd have supper on the flight but they weren't especially sleepy because it was still 7 or 8 o'clock in the evening British time and so I would say 'Prime Minister, shall we

have a beer on the veranda before turning in?’ So I had this extraordinary opportunity of chatting to the PM and his private secretary over a late-night glass of beer before they went to bed and then the next day they would fly on to Basra, or Baghdad. They would usually fly, of course, they wouldn’t take the trucks, which actually later on ... I first went to Basra in 2006 by land, but that later on got too dangerous and anyone going went flying. We still had to take the supplies in by land, somehow they didn’t attack the convoys, I’m not quite sure why not. But with people, we always flew people in and out.

MG: And did you frequently visit?

SL: No not very often because obviously the job was in Kuwait but in fact I went only twice, I went once by land as I said to Basra and back by land, and I think once (or was it twice?) to Baghdad.

MG: You’ve got here a quotation: “now is not the time to go wobbly, George.” Was that you speaking to George Dubya or ...?

SL: No, no, no, that was Thatcher. So I wrote that down because while we were not top ambassador, embassy in Kuwait, as, I say without being too pretentious, [we were] in Oman ... The Americans were [top embassy] in Kuwait, had a very big embassy and after all they had huge numbers of troops in Iraq. And both they and we had small training camps, acclimatisation camps, in Kuwait. Actually, we didn’t initially, but during my time, that was one of the things I had to negotiate, which wasn’t too difficult to negotiate to be honest, but anyway I did, had to agree with the Kuwaitis that we could start up an acclimatisation camp in Kuwait, for our troops going into Basra so they had three or four weeks in which to do extra training and just get used to the heat actually, in Kuwait. But, although, as I say, we weren’t number one, the Kuwaitis still remembered the crucial role, absolutely crucial role that the British had played in the politics after the invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Thatcher, and this has been recorded but anyway I just mention it because this was the Kuwaiti perception and this was how they remembered it, Thatcher and Bush had been in Aspen, Colorado, I think. If you remember, it wasn’t at all clear that the international community was going to rescue Kuwait. There were people who didn’t like the Kuwaitis very much, and there were people who thought that this was an Arab affair, that they could sort out themselves, indeed that’s the title of Alan Munro’s book, isn’t it, if I recall correctly? Well he called it ‘An Arab

Affair' 'An Arabian Affair', that's about the campaign. Alan Munro was ambassador in Riyadh, at the time of the liberation of Kuwait. So, in Aspen, Colorado, a number of people ... and the Americans, as I say, were not firmly decided. Thatcher, of course, had strong views on a number of issues but one of those strong views, experienced in the Falklands, was the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by force, so the idea that the Iraqis could just walk in and acquire Kuwait and no one do anything about it was anathema to her and that was at the time she's alleged to have said to George Bush, 'Now is not the time to go wobbly, George.' He didn't go wobbly, but the Kuwaitis certainly perceived or believed that the American firmness of action in recovering their territory was at least in part due to Thatcher's firm views. So we got a lot of credit for that.

MG: It put us in a better position. I should have actually mentioned when you went there, it says that the Emir died and there was a succession, so you met the Emir and then he died unexpectedly, did he, or ..?

SL: No, not unexpectedly, he was very ill. Again, I remember recording this, I went along for my presentation of credentials. It was really terrible, it was really quite distressing because I said, 'Your Highness, it's a great honour to meet you and it's a great honour for me to be the British Ambassador in Kuwait and I have pleasure in handing you my credentials, signed by Her Majesty the Queen who sends you her very best greetings.' Words to that effect. And the Emir barely replied, but his interpreter said, 'His Highness thanks you for your greetings from Her Majesty the Queen, welcomes you to the State of Kuwait and wishes you the best for your time while here.' I would then make a little speech about British commercial relations, again the Emir barely replied, but the interpreter said 'His Highness reciprocates your good wishes for the flourishing of commercial relations between our two countries ...' I mean it was, as I said in my reporting telegram, it would have been funny if it hadn't been so sad. So it was not surprising that two weeks later he died and then there was a great flurry which again has been well-reported elsewhere, because the ruling ... because one of the things that he had failed to do before dying was appoint a new Crown Prince. The Crown Prince, who had been Crown Prince for some time, he literally got in the car to go to the parliament to take his oath of office when the other members of the ruling family stopped him and within a couple of days had named the then Prime Minister, whom I mentioned before, Sabah al-Ahmed, to become Emir.

MG: Well I was going to ask you about that, because when you said that the PM had become Emir, I thought I didn't realise he was a member of the family already because I would imagine there was a dynasty that would take it on, as there appears to be in Saudi Arabia and so on ...

SL: About half the cabinet in Kuwait are members of the Al Sabah.

MG: I see. That explains it, yes.

SL: Unlike, by the way, Oman, where I don't think there are hardly any members of the Cabinet who are from the Sultan's family.

MG: One thing I should have asked you about in relation to Oman was the help over Iran, what did you mean there?

SL: All through this time, the 2000s, we had different problems with Iran. Sometimes we had that incident when the Revolutionary Guards Council, the Iranian IRGC, troops took prisoner some British Marines in the Northern Gulf, [I] can't remember the details of that affair, and they were up to other tricks and throughout it all there were the negotiations for curbing the Iranian nuclear campaign, which the Kuwaitis also felt very strongly about. So, we needed an additional mediator to help with the relationship, the very bad relationship, with Iran, and Sultan Qaboos was very helpful in this regard. And I remember the Sultan saying to me in one of these tête-a-tête sessions that we had, 'We know the Persians ...' I think he said the Persians, or maybe he didn't, maybe I've made that up, 'we know the Iranians, and we've had dealings with them for hundreds of years, they're very close neighbours.' I don't know how well you know the geography but the most northerly part of Oman sticks out into the Gulf, it's called Musandam, it's an enclave actually, it's not connected to the rest of Oman, it's an enclave on the other side of the Emirates and I've been there a couple of times, and from Musandam you look over the Gulf and you can physically see Iran. I mean it's very narrow, about 50km, and it's one of these crucial straits, through which all the oil and gas tankers from Kuwait, Qatar, eastern Saudi Arabia, Emirates, they all have to go through the Strait of Hormuz and actually they're in Omani [waters], they're on the Omani side of the median line when they do so. But this relationship which has often been hostile, and the Persians occupied bits of Oman in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, 17<sup>th</sup> and early

18<sup>th</sup> century, goes back a long way and the Sultan said to me, 'I listen to the Iranian Arabic Service so that I know what they're thinking, I know what their perspective is on politics and life.'

MG: Have they got the same strain of Islam? Because Saudi Arabia is different ...

SL: No, no, sorry this is crucial to the understanding of the Iran-Saudi dynamic. The Iranians used to be Sunni actually, now by far the majority are Shiite, and the Saudis' majority is Sunni but they have a significant Shiite minority in the Eastern province, and of course the Kuwaitis, Qataris and Emiratis have a Shiite minority, Bahrain is the other way round, they have a Shiite majority but a Sunni ruler, the Omanis have a very small Shiite minority.

MG: I don't quite ... to an outsider, it's difficult to understand how you may have had a Shia majority and now it's a minority; but is it like sort of Catholics and Protestants or Evangelicals and Church of England? You don't normally see these things waxing and waning in an ethnic group, do you?

SL: No, they haven't waxed and waned. Sorry, did I give the wrong impression?

MG: No, you said that Iran ...

SL: Oh yes, Iran. Sorry, I'm talking about the 16<sup>th</sup> century, I'm talking about a long time ago and I can't remember why it was that they flipped, but no for some time Iran has been the flagbearer for Shiite Islam.

MG: And that's what's causing the hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia?

SL: No, it's more complex than that, it's not just religion. As indeed, the wars of religion in Europe were not just about religion.

MG: No, it never is just religion. And one thing I didn't ask you about was where was Israel in all of this: what were their relations like with Oman and Kuwait? Because their relationship obviously now with Iran is very bad, but their relationship with Jordan is not so bad, and I just wondered if they were figuring at all on the horizon at that point?

SL: Not really. The Minister of Religious Affairs told me that there was a small number of Jews living in Oman, but I think it must have been very, very small. There was no Jewish synagogue, there were Christian churches and there were mosques of different kinds, but the number of Jews was very small and the Omanis, I don't think they cared very much, or most Omanis – a minority would have done – but I don't think they cared very much about Israel and Palestine. They would mouth the right words if required to, but I don't think they would bother too much about it. Kuwait is rather more complex. They don't like either of them much, I suppose, because they had been pretty sympathetic to the Palestinians and indeed allowed a large number of them into Kuwait, I mean a large number – tens of thousands, a decent number – to work and give them work permits. They didn't give them Kuwaiti citizenship but they didn't give any foreigners citizenship, however long you stayed. The Palestinians had quite a lot of jobs, you know, professionals, there had been some teachers, there had been medics, lawyers, I'm not sure, but professional types as well as manual labourers but the manual labour in Kuwait came from mainly the Indian sub-continent. So there were these Palestinians holding down lots of jobs in Kuwait and then, as Saddam Hussein invaded in August 1990, what did Yasser Arafat, then alive and the leader of the Palestinians, do? He came out in support of Saddam Hussein. So the Kuwaitis said 'Well stuff all this' and any Palestinian who left during the invasion, and numbers did, was not allowed back in. And the Kuwaitis, not surprisingly, didn't forget this. When I was there, I think the Yemen crisis was just starting or there was an appeal for help for Yemen, which was suffering. And I went in on instructions to ask for Kuwaiti help, financial help I think. The Kuwaitis sort of looked at me as though I was barmy, but not quite, they were too polite for that! But they recalled that a Yemeni leader had also come out in support of Saddam Hussein, and this was 12-15 years later, you know, but they were certainly not going to lift a finger for Yemen after that.

MG: With affection, you've described them as being a bit cross-grained. What was it like living there? Did you make good friendships with them?

SL: Yes, I had a lot of Kuwaiti friends. There was a big party with them last week, yes.

MG: What was your house and so on like? It sounded as if in Oman you'd got this fantastic situation.

SL: Yes, we had a remarkable house in Kuwait. Built in the 1930s by an architect working for Lutyens in Delhi. And it's interesting politically because it was half-paid for by the Government of India and half by the Imperial Treasury, the UK, because the Resident at that time - it wasn't an embassy of course, it was a Residency - the Resident was appointed by the Government of India, not by the Government of the UK. He was British, of course.

MG: Pre-1947, yes. Did it look like a Lutyens house then? Was it palatial?

SL: No, no, not exactly palatial. What was interesting about it was that it had a huge veranda.

MG: This is where you entertained the Prime Ministers!

SL: Yes. So it features in a book that's been recently published by James Stourton. [Shows book.] That's the front door. This is very famous, this front door, because after the invasion, so August 1990, the ambassador, who was Michael Weston ... The ambassador stayed on until December when the FCO said 'Look, you really need to go, because we're going to start shooting the place up.' So they very carefully locked everything up, walked out, and escaped and the Iraqis rather remarkably let them go. An Indian locally-engaged member of staff looked after the place and had the key. When the troops came and invaded, recaptured, Kuwait, the British said 'OK, let's get back into the embassy.' And the Indian locally-engaged member of staff said, 'Well that's fine, I've got the keys, here you are!' And the British Army said 'No, no, no, the Iraqis have probably booby-trapped it.' So they landed troops on the roof, abseiled down, blew up the front door, so the only damage to the Embassy in Kuwait was made by British troops themselves! So here's a classic picture of the building: office downstairs, ambassador's residence, big apartment, on the top. [Again shows picture] That's how it was when it was first built, desert all round. The sea just there.

MG: And then there's oasis, lush green oasis. Wonderful!

SL: Here's the veranda. So this is where I sat with the Prime Minister. It's a quite interesting construction because they had to use ... most buildings in Kuwait, there's nothing wider ... the old buildings of this era ... there's nothing wider than the length of a mangrove pole, which is

about two metres, so lots of old Kuwaiti buildings have rooms that are no wider than that. But this of course has steel, which was imported from Britain for those girders.

MG: So, the last thing I have to ask you, to wind up, is your review of the Diplomatic Service and how you think it's changed and whether it's changed for the better or not. Everyone is asked this. I'm not trying to be difficult!

SL: Well, there's no point in railing against change. I remember ... someone's probably told you about the time when we changed the system of valedictory despatches. I think it was maybe, was it Ivor Roberts's despatch from Rome? Anyway, there has been more than one occasion when an ambassador on leaving had written his final valedictory despatch and banged on about where he thought ministers had gone wrong or where the Service had gone wrong, and the Secretary of State at the time said, or the Permanent Secretary maybe it was, said 'Look, we've had enough of this. You lot, you're senior people, you're ambassadors, you've come through the ranks probably, you're in a senior position, if you think there are things that are wrong with the Service, then while you're in a senior position, try and do something about them! It's not good manners and it's not efficient to walk out of the door and slam it after you.' That was the expression he used. And so they ended valedictory despatches, or they said you should write a final despatch, sum up what you've done during your time and send it to your Head of Department and Under-Secretary where appropriate, and give it a circulation, but we're not going to circulate these things all round the world. I don't think I wanted to write that sort of thing anyway after being ambassador in two places and high commissioner in one. If I have a criticism, I don't think we have, and I don't think we had when I left, a perfect solution for the right balance, shall I say, in appointing people to the senior positions, actually, any positions. Actually, maybe what I'm saying applies even more to junior positions, because the system of applying for jobs and having a board dealing with it and then possibly failing, well, probably likely failing, and having to apply for another one is a system which is designed by the winners and works well for the winners and it doesn't work well for people who are average, which, by definition, a very large number of people are going to be. A very small percentage are going to be winners and a small percentage are going to be losers. So, for example, I remember an occasion when, this was a junior member of staff came to me and said 'I'm leaving here in four months' time, I've got to apply for a job, these are the ones which are available in my grade', and he mentioned three posts. We talked about it a bit, I gave him my advice and sort of expectations he might

have in the three places and the sort of order I'd put them in for his next board. So he went away, did that, came back, said, 'I didn't get any of those, and so next month the board is offering me another three. What do you think of them?' And actually I think he had to leave the post because someone else had been appointed to it, without yet having succeeded in getting something that he wanted. And so then he got put in a nondescript department in London, until they could find him a permanent job. Now he wasn't particularly incompetent, he was average, and was not, as they say, winning the competition. In the olden days, we had something called a Personnel Department which was replaced by Human Resources Department and that in itself as the name implies that human resources are just another resource like money or furniture or buildings. They're not! They're people. The thing about a Personnel Department, it says personnel, these are people and the Personnel Department, frankly I think it took more care of the employees. The leaders they say 'Oh, our essential resources are our people,' but they don't actually ... they say that but they don't behave like that always. And, you know, it didn't work too badly for me. I got quite decent jobs, like lots of people, I expect, I thought that I could have done bigger jobs successfully but you know, there it is.

MG: And how it is now, you know, as you know it, do you think it's better now? Or still selecting winners?

SL: No, well, no I don't think that's changed, in fact, it's been accentuated by these interviews, I think they have more interviews now and less work done by boards. I thought the board system was pretty neutral and worked in some senses quite well. You know, when I saw the descriptions of myself that had been put to the board, they were pretty good descriptions I thought, couldn't really complain about them. I didn't think they were unfair. You know, like any organisation, it works for those who fit the kind of pattern that's been developed over the years and if you're not quite in that pattern then you don't get the top jobs.

MG: And what about the fact that people feel it's been starved of money and cut back too much?

SL: Of course that's the case, but it's no different from any other government department. The difference between the Foreign Office and other government departments is that, if

you're asked to cut the FO department budget by 10%, all you've got to cut is people: you've got no programme budget to cut, whereas in the Ministry of Health it's one less hospital. But that's a reality of life, there's no point in complaining about that, that's just how it is. I mean, from what I hear, it's not a very happy Ministry at the moment, but I think that's quite largely, or quite significantly to do with Brexit and what we would think of as the main foreign issue of the day has been taken out of the FO and placed somewhere else. Of course there have been a lot of big changes and a lot of them are good, we've got much stronger dependence now on locally-engaged people and I think that's quite right. There's been some resistance to that but I don't think that's reasonable, you know, the pool from which you might select staff to put into locally-engaged jobs has got much bigger and a much higher quality in a number of places. I think it's a pity because some lovely opportunities have been lost for secretarial and clerical staff and so British people who join the FO at the secretarial and clerical level have many fewer opportunities abroad than they used to, that's a pity because you know it's a fun thing for a young and indeed not young person to do, but you can't blame, I think, the FO. These jobs can be done just as effectively and much more cheaply and with more continuity by locally-engaged staff. So that's been a big change. I don't think the Service has been nearly as successful as it had hoped in attracting ethnic minority staff to senior jobs but that's going to take a very long time, I think. It will eventually happen, but it's happening all rather slowly.

MG: Well, thank you very much indeed. It's been really interesting.