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MACGREGOR, John Malcolm (born 3 October 1946)

CVO 1992

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF JOHN MACGREGOR CVO

RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY CATHERINE MANNING

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Today is Monday 18 November 2019 and this is the first interview with John Macgregor for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Catherine Manning recording.

CM: John, I am going to start off by asking you the question that we always ask, which is, what was your reason for applying to join the Diplomatic Service? In your case it is a particularly interesting question because you had actually started on another career. You'd been teaching at Cranleigh School, Surrey, and you'd done it for about four years before you got into the Foreign Office.

JM: First, I have to say that I was not a typical candidate for the Foreign Office, when I came to the actual bar of decision-making about the exams and acceptance of the offer and so on. I had indeed started off down the track of playing and teaching music, having read Music, which was effectively music history, at Oxford, and found that very stimulating, but I just had the feeling that wasn't what I wanted to do for ever. It was partly that when you do something very physical like playing music, the likelihood is that your best days are perhaps before you're thirty and thereafter it's the throw of a dice as to what you'll be able to do, so you tend to get into teaching and administration and festival organisation and that sort of thing. I wasn't sure that I wanted to do that as a long-term career. The second string to my bow had always been languages. I'd gone to France as a boy and had learned French as a domestic language and found it very stimulating being in another culture. When I was at University, I learned Spanish and I went off to Spain to do a serious language course at the University of Zaragoza. I loved Spanish poetry, Spanish song, so it related to the world that I was in, but it was obviously a side-line at that time. Then after I left University and I was teaching, I taught myself Farsi, Persian, in my spare time, and went off twice to Persia, as a wandering gypsy, and found such an exotically different culture very stimulating indeed. I was never a great Persian speaker, but I could manage communication, basic reading and conversation: I think it was that experience of Persia that made me think I would like to do something different – I didn't know much about the Diplomatic Service, I thought it might be something like the Younghusband expedition of 1901 to Tibet, more of a sand between your

toes experience, than it turned out to be. But nevertheless, it kickstarted me. I applied and found that when you get to the serious bit of the examination there were six of you making up a little committee. I thought four of them seemed distinctly better qualified than me and with the kind of background that perhaps the Office was looking for. As it turned out, the Office were perhaps looking for a bit more diversity. First of all, I passed, feeling a lucky outsider, but when we actually arrived in the Office, in the summer of 1973, we were a surprisingly diverse group. There was a former Jesuit priest; there was a doctor; there was me, someone with a maths degree. Certainly not just from a Politics or History background. So that's the roundabout story of how I became to be a diplomat.

CM: When you arrived in the Foreign Office in 1973 with all your diverse colleagues, did they give you any training for what you were going to do next?

JM: At that time they gave you a very brief – I think it was a fortnight – on procedure: what a submission looks like; what format it should be presented in; the sort of language you use in your relations with ministers and other government departments; that sort of basic material which at that time was vital. That was the language you had to learn. But it was very brief and I was then thrown into a UN-related job and, as luck would have it, because I'd been in the US as a student and I loved the place, I was going to spend eight months of my first year and a half in New York City.

2nd Secretary, UN Affairs, 1973–74

CM: Can I just ask you about this. At an earlier stage these posts for new entrants at the UN were highly prized and when they ranked people coming into the Foreign Office, the top two got to go to the UN. Did you ask to go to the UN? Was it an award for your high performance in the exam?

JM: God knows. I have simply no idea. There were me and two others. The two others were reporting officers for the General Assembly and I was placed in a different job - Foreign Office legman to a Treasury Counsellor responsible for the Committee of the UN Budget. That post was an inheritance from an earlier phase in the UN when the Western countries had much more of a say of what was and was not done, and so the Administrative and Financial Committee really did play rather a guiding role in all this, rather like the Treasury in UK domestic policy. By 1973/4 that had changed because the so-called Group of 77, the totality of those who counted themselves as developing countries, post-colonial whatever, were

numerically dominant and therefore basically all votes, where they determined to do something, would be won by them, so it was much more trying to persuade behind the scenes a bit rather than simply modify what we regarded as over-expensive policies. So it was a moment of turning in the UN and it did mean that rather than just sit there taking notes I had a bit more of a hands-on job. There was a change of Treasury Counsellor while I was there, and after that the post went to somebody from the Foreign Office, because the Treasury no longer saw advantage in having their own representative in New York. One arrives at the beginning of the General Assembly cycle - beginning of September to Christmas. There was not terribly much to do in the Committee in the early weeks, because the financial consequences of policies come later in the process. Once policies are agreed the secretariat has to cost them. These were the documents we had to discuss and agree. So there's a rush of work at the end. But at the beginning there was time to do other things. Who would deny the glories of art, music and theatre in New York? It was a great New York experience. I think that looking back on it, everyone who gets the chance to be in the UN in New York should grab it at any stage, because understanding how that enormous body of people take decisions, or fail to take decisions, how the UN proper links with the Specialized Agencies, all this is important when one bumps later into expectations that the UN can 'do something'. There are great limitations, but there are real possibilities. So starting off there was a good experience, personally delightful, and I got to know a bit about financial and administrative procedure.

CM: I can imagine. It was presumably during this period when you were going to and from New York that you must have done the hard language test.

JM: I did the MLAT hard language test. One was not vouchsafed the result in those days. I had hoped that I would go off to MECAS in Shemlan to do Arabic, because of course it was the same alphabet as Persian, but many more countries. In retrospect that was one of the many lucky turns in my career because although the world I went into in 1973 was one in which the Arabists walked tall, later the Slavic experts (the team I subsequently joined) were more to the fore. Anyway at the end of 1974 - I was asked to learn Hindi to go to India.

1st Secretary (political), New Delhi, 1975-78

CM: Was there any choice?

JM: Well, you can always turn these things down, theoretically, but a green cucumber like me, turning something down is a bit dramatic. I was both keen and not keen, because I still had Arabic in my mind, but as soon as I got into India and Hindi, I wouldn't have done anything else for the world.

CM: Nine months at SOAS? (School of Oriental and Asian Studies)

JM: No, only my first two or three months at SOAS, and then I went off to India and we just kind of invented really a kind of cultural and linguistic immersion. I say 'we'; I think I did. No one pushed me in any direction. I bumped into, in my first couple of months in India, someone I'm still in touch with today, an American academic, a wonderful Hindi-speaker who has subsequently written books on poetry of North India and is still teaching at Columbia University. Simply luck if you end up with somebody like Jack Hawley, still Professor – you do go on for ever in America - a lovely man with all sorts of experiences and insights into India. He also was on a learning curve too, but on a rather higher level – it's a good rule to play tennis paired with a better player than you are. That helped me enormously. He had come across an excellent Hindi teacher in Benares. Only one in the High Commission had ever been in Benares before; it was thought to be a little bit rough, but that really gave me immersion in language and culture that I couldn't have got any other way. I arrived back in New Delhi after ten months with pretty fluent Hindi and, perhaps more important, a sense of how India ticks, not among the English-speaking elite, but at a more local, village level. I used to go out with my teacher. I learned the art of riding on the back of a bicycle: it's not easy sitting on that little luggage rack, not to be thrown over as the thing runs into a pot-hole. He himself was a village man, the teacher; not an august professor. Going into villages, one got a feel for the pecking order in a village. Who's in charge? Who makes the decisions? The social make-up, the Harijan community. Well, you need to understand caste anyway, if you are in India and looking at politics and life. So it was a very good start when I took over from Robin Christopher in November that year, 1975.

CM: Can you tell us exactly what your job title and your job were, now that you were starting, equipped as a Hindi-speaker?

JM: I was Second, then First, Secretary, simply a question of age, unless you blotted your copybook. I was First Secretary Internal Political, with a First Secretary External Political parallel to me, under the Head of Chancery who didn't interfere on the internal political side. The High Commissioner then was Sir Michael Walker, a gent of the old school who

encouraged but interfered minimally in my work. It was a good period to run in: in the summer of that year Mrs Gandhi had declared a State of Emergency – the first time in Post-Independence India. That was the summer of '75; I was doing the language when all that occurred and I have to say that in the streets of Benares, there was not much impact. People were just going about their normal work. In political circles, academic circles, in politics it had a very big effect. People were being thrown into prison in their hundreds, so it was a defining moment. Mrs Gandhi's motive was personal and party. She thought that there was a move against inside Congress and her instinct was to press the emergency button. She seriously thought she was going to be ousted. She had already been condemned by the court in Allahabad and then by the High Court, who had ruled that she would have her rights as an MP taken away for using state funds to support her political campaign. It was frankly by today's standards pretty minor; nevertheless, in its wonderful way the Indian judicial machine's wheels had turned and Mrs Gandhi, convinced she was in a desperate situation, pulled the emergency cord, and landed in unknown territory. India turned into a surprisingly dictatorial, absolutist country for the next 21 months.

Going back to my own provincial life, temporarily no effect. I just went on doing my Hindi and going round villages and so on. As it happened, there had been no confrontations in that particular area of what was then called east Uttar Pradesh. There weren't great riots or opposition people being marched through the streets, but it was happening elsewhere and of course that was the scene I got into once I got to Delhi and seriously into the job.

Nevertheless, by the beginning of 1976, the surprise of it had gone by and many were rotting in jail, from her own party as much as from opposition parties and in a curious way life had resumed, but with a lot of pretty nasty things going on. As it turned out, the issue that really killed Mrs Gandhi's political chances when she opened the door to elections was the vasectomy campaign, led by Sanjay, her younger son, who was a young man in a hurry, who saw himself as the Emperor Elect of India. A pretty unpleasant guy with some pretty unpleasant people round him. They focussed on population growth as India's great problem, and sterilisation as the only effective weapon. They set targets: x number of vasectomies to be carried out. Of course, it became absurd; they were sterilizing children, pensioners, anybody, just to tick the box. In a society in which having many children is a blessing, it did not enjoy popular backing at street level. Indeed, many people at street level became the victims of it. That was the story of that year. Michael Walker did not want us to be making waves, but was happy that the Deputy High Commissioner, Len Allinson, downwards,

including me, should be at liberty to meet people from the opposition who weren't in jail, who gave us a lot of information about those who were and various minor uprisings here and there. That was the character of that year: calm before the storm. Anyway, perhaps because of that calm Mrs Gandhi made the mistake of believing her sycophants, who perhaps genuinely thought that the Emergency was quite popular, that if they lifted it they would come sweeping back to legitimate power and that was better than risking a permanent Emergency. So in January 1977 Mrs Gandhi announced that there would be an election in March and some of the Emergency restrictions would be lifted and quite a lot of people were let out of jail. It was then possible to talk to some of these people who, needless to say, had some very bitter things to say.

In the meantime, John Thomson had taken over as High Commissioner, and he was a very different cup of tea. He wanted to know everything that was going on and was just fascinated by the place, so we were suddenly moving from first gear to fourth. He sent me off round villages in north India, which are the key to winning elections in India, to see how things were going. I had a fascinating tour, rattling around in my old Land Rover, in my kurta pajama, being very unthreatening, never wearing a suit and, of course, speaking Hindi, greeted as a bit of a miracle: when they see a white man coming, they don't expect you to speak Hindi. It was very illuminating on so many levels, but the key thing was that as I went to in each place – we picked a series of constituencies, like Mrs Gandhi's own constituency, for instance – and I always went to the Congress office and the Janata Party coalition office – and everywhere the Congress office was just dead. One person sitting behind a desk mournfully looking at a pile of paper, with nobody outside. In India it is normal to be asking favours of the candidate in an election. That's how the system works. But nobody was queueing to ask Congress for favours. The Janata Party, a mile away you could hardly get near to it. I had to saw my way through the crowds. Everywhere I went that was repeated. Eventually, I came back to John Thomson and I said, Well, there's only so much you can do on a tour like this. Maybe I've just been to all the places Janata is doing very well in and Congress is doing well in others, but I didn't see a single piece of evidence that Congress was on a winning ticket. Well, that did indeed prove to be the outcome of the March '77 election.

CM: Did John Thomson make a call before the election?

JM: Yes, he did, but he agreed with me that perhaps I hadn't seen everybody. North India is very important, but I hadn't been to Bengal, for instance; I hadn't been to the Punjab. So we predicted a narrow victory for the non-Congress parties. The result was in fact overwhelming - in North India, Congress won not a single seat. The Janata coalition had a comfortable majority. Of course they were an enormously varied bunch, from communists to right wing Hindu nationalists. Eventually that came to be their downfall, because they were united in their wish to bring down Mrs Gandhi, but second came their internal rivalries, which would gradually emerge. There was just a moment of pause after the election when some people - you heard it among the numerous foreign journalists who descended on India - thought that there might be a military coup. It takes quite a long time to count all the votes in India so it was three days on when we got a full result. That day, the Commander in Chief gave an interview in which he underlined that the Army was the servant of the constitution, the people and the government in power. Game set and match against the plot theorists. I don't think Mrs .Gandhi would have wanted to inspire a military coup. She retired wounded into something that is special in Indian culture and mythology, *vaapasee*, withdrawal in the face of impossible odds. She did so pretty gracefully actually. It was a terrible blow for her. Then the question was who was going to be Prime Minister? A wonderful rotund figure, Jagjivan Ram, who was the agriculture minister under Mrs Gandhi was being mentioned. He had changed sides at the very last minute. Even in India that was considered too last minute to be credible, to walk from your Congress ministerial office into the Janata prime minister's office. So he quite rightly was ruled out. They opted for a very Indian-style solution: they asked Jaya Prakash Narayan, a great figure of Indian independent thought, a Gandhian figure, who was very ill, but nevertheless conscious and in touch. He said, 'You must make Morarji Desai the Prime Minister.' And that pretty much decided the matter. There was a confirmatory vote because Parliament did have to approve him, but it was a foregone conclusion. Morarji was in his eighties, but mentally all there, and respected. He became prime minister of a perfectly competent cabinet and indeed cabinet government was restored, because Mrs Gandhi had increasingly just operated with a few friends and cronies around her and hadn't bothered too much about the rest of the Cabinet let alone Parliament. Suddenly there was a very active democracy. It was a period of extraordinary elation in India and we got brownie points for predicting the Congress defeat, even if we didn't get the numbers right. Congress in fact put up quite a strong performance in the South which had been much less touched by the Emergency. Sanjay and his lads with their vasectomy campaigns had focussed around Delhi and from there across the North. The

South was less touched by these things and always feels a certain separateness; anyway Congress returned a respectable number of MPs, about 150, in a house of 560 or so. But the Southern group had their own priorities and concerns; the main strands of policy were Northern focussed, and so the Janata coalition counted.

British-Indian relations are complicated. Up to the 1970s, barely anyone came to high political office who had not been put in prison by the British - a seal of honour. At the same time, the British inheritance, in administration, law, language has deep roots. You have to play your cards carefully, get the language right, and John Thomson was very good at that.

An important thing John did, quite early on, was invite Mrs Gandhi around for supper. There were just six of us round the table including a couple who were old friends of Mrs G to put her at her ease, and me. I'm not saying that John had a premonition that one day she would come back again. But she was a very significant figure and he wanted to see her in the flesh and how she ticked. She'd lost her seat; and to an amusing but way-out man who had been rewarded with the post of health minister. Apart from introducing one or two vegetarian fetishes, I don't think he had any impact at all on the Health Ministry. Mrs G was not bitter, rather giving the impression that this could not last, and was biding her time. It was the first time she had been invited out, other than within her family, since the election. It was a typical quiet coup for John, but he also kept up a good relationship with Morarji, who was a good bureaucrat; he made a note of things and that had not happened during Mrs Gandhi's reign, when it was all coteries and nobody keeping proper notes of anything. In this initial phase, Janata ran a rather responsible government, actually.

Through '77 we were trying to fix a Prime Ministerial visit. In the end, President Carter came on New Year's Day 1978; five days later Jim Callaghan came. The job which fell to me was to ask Morarji to sign a brief but slightly complicated document about nuclear matters, because following India's 1974 so-called peaceful nuclear explosion - their entry ticket into the nuclear world - we were trying to get them to sign up to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, as a non-nuclear weapons state, which of course they didn't want to do, for all their protestations about the peaceful nature of their test. They said they would sign, but only if Pakistan and China both did it at the same time. So it was stuck. I had been sent along because it was thought that I might be the person who could get past the nuclear experts into No. 1 Safdarjang Road, the No. 10 of India - and beard Mararji personally. We all knew that Morarji got up very early, like half past four, and engaged in auto-urinary therapy - drinking

his own urine and eating much garlic. I just decided that the best moment to go was then, because the acolytes who might close the door on such a messenger wouldn't be up yet. It was exactly what happened. I chatted to the guard on the gate explaining that I had a special message – everyone knew that Callaghan was there – from Mr Callaghan to Morarji, Could I go in and deliver it? And I just walked through the place. Nobody said nay. And there he was, looking quite dapper at five o'clock in the morning. I said, 'Oh, Prime Minister, right, I've got a message from Mr Callaghan for you. Would you like to have a look at this and see if you could sign it?' He was a very efficient kind of man; sat down; read it; and said, 'I can't see any harm in this.' That was when I had a moment of decision: I said, 'Well, I don't know, Prime Minister, if you want to refer to one or two of your experts on the subject before actually signing, so could I leave it with you.' I think that was probably the right thing to do, because had he signed, he'd have had a hell of a problem from his experts on nuclear matters, who quite likely would have got him to reverse his position. As it was, the issue wasn't dead in the water, Morarji was aware of the issue, and what we achieved in the end was probably better than we would have achieved without the 5 o'clock encounter. But whichever way, it was certainly a moment.

CM: That is the most amazing story. I've never heard you tell that story before. I think that is extraordinary.

JM: Well, I got a very nice leather framed photo of Callaghan and a warm thank you letter from Bryan Cartledge, who was then the Private Secretary at No. 10, yes, so it was recognised that I had done something rather unusual. And something which, without all that Benares and Hindi, probably wouldn't have worked.

CM: No. And I don't think you would have known in yourself how to behave, the body language, in order to become as if you were Indian, just going in as a supplicant to speak to the Moghul, the raja.

JM: Yes, just as the man in the street would queue for hours to see the Emperor to say that someone has stolen his sweetshop ... I managed it in 15 minutes.

CM: That must have been a high point and a very special moment in your Indian career.

JM: Yes, it was. I had one more solid achievement during the Callaghan visit. The UK press, who were always looking for an angle to criticize, were working themselves up to a story saying that the man who really counted in all this was Jaya Prakash Narayan in Patna.

Why wasn't Callaghan going along to see the great man, the man who appointed Morarji Prime Minister, and so on? The answer was: completely impractical, of course. Meanwhile, John Thomson was on his hospital bed with hepatitis. He was prone, but needless to say mentally absolutely whirring. I went to see him and we came up with the idea of a public message to Jaya Prakash Narayan from the Prime Minister. It began, 'I salute you, who are one of India's great patriots ... very sorry I can't come to Patna to tell you this personally ... but Indian democracy, and India's friends, owe an enormous debt to you', you know, something like that. We got the letter into the press that morning, and of course J P Narayan replied through the press to say, 'Thank you very much, dear Prime Minister. I value your wonderful words ...' John had the idea; I drafted it, in completely over the top language by British standards; it was amazing that Jim Callaghan signed it off. The old India hands among the press corps were furious because their carping story was dead in the water. So there were two special personal moments in that visit.

Europe Department (Internal), FCO, 1979-81

CM: It was at the end of '78 when you went back to London and you went to the Europe Department. Were they Internal and External at that stage? You were in Internal?

JM: I was Internal.

CM: And you were back with budgets.

JM: I succeeded one of the most brilliant people of the Foreign Office of her generation, Alyson Bailes. One should perhaps try to avoid being the successor to someone who was quite so good as that. But she certainly left things in good order. The big internal issue which was really beginning to run was our net budget contribution. We had joined the EEC on 1 January 1973, so by '79 the tapering transition arrangements were running out, and the underlying problem was plain to see - our receipts from the EEC budget remained much lower than our contribution, which was based on a mix of customs revenues and notional share of VAT. The problem had been identified in the original negotiations, but all that had been achieved was a recognition that if 'an unacceptable situation' emerged, something would be done about it. It was speculated at the time that new EEC policies would be agreed from which we might benefit disproportionately. By 1979 this had not happened, and the situation was being portrayed in the UK popular press as inefficient French farmers doing well at the UK taxpayer's expense, while British farmers were more efficient and thereby not

doing so well out of the CAP. One aspect or other of this issue became my daily bread. Though the manner of it caused much dudgeon among the established EEC membership, it was to Mrs Thatcher's credit that she really did grab this issue and eventually, in fact well after my time, because it was not until '84 that the British Budget Rebate was finally agreed, saw it through to a conclusion.

I was a back room boy, just occasionally emerging into the light. George Walden, who was the Principal Private Secretary at the time, thought that it would be a good idea for someone unthreatening from inside the works, to come round and talk through what the budget contribution issue was, because Lord Carrington kept saying he really couldn't understand it. Net contribution? What net contribution? So I went along and had quite a good chat with Carrington, going through the basics, trying to simplify more than complicate. It was a nice occasion, and he said at the end of it, 'You know, you're the first person I've talked to who spoke a language I could understand about this.' So perhaps somewhere along the line, teaching those schoolboys, had helped hone my communication skills.

CM: It must have been a bit of a shock after India.

JM: It was. It was the first time I'd done a bureaucratic job and in the Foreign Office itself. This was the first time I'd dealt with a serious issue and surrounded by big hitters: John Fretwell, who subsequently went to Paris; David Hannay, subsequently our man in Brussels and so on. They were demanding and under time pressure. Our so-called Third Room, was quite high voltage. Everyone in it later went on to ambassadorial posts. Stimulating and educative. Like the Abbé de Sieyès in the French Revolution, 'I survived'.

CM: It was a desk job at the work horse level of the Foreign Office. First secretaries are the ones who are really doing the bulk of the work.

JM: Yes, they draft everything. So it was good training and an issue worth getting a grasp of.

CM: And your days were spent at your desk with paper files.

JM: Yes, no IT. All the typing done by our wonderful secretaries. You also needed to have a very good registry clerk, because you often had to pull out bits and pieces from previous iterations of the issue. There was a clear ladder on my issues – me to Anthony Goodenough the then labelled "Assistant", the Head of Department Peter Petrie, and finally the Assistant

Under Secretary John Fretwell, later David Hannay. Of course we were part of a wider Whitehall team, overlapping with the Treasury and the European Secretariat of the Cabinet Office. The Treasury very much with an eye to the national coffers were keen as mustard to do a deal with the European partners that involved getting some of what Mrs Thatcher called 'our money' back. There was a lot of creative tension. There were good people working on European affairs throughout Whitehall. We knew each other. Although, by the time I left that job, we had not reached the final phase of the budget agreement, we did very much set it up then. It was at least recognised that there was a problem and something would have to be done about it. Of course, an elaborate system had to be invented by the Commission to produce a rebate for the UK, easier to do then because we were below the average GNP of the Community of Nine. It was a good moment to learn how that complicated Brussels animal worked.

Private Secretary to Minister of State, FCO, 1981-82

CM: Obviously a tough two years in the European Department, doing the budget. Then you went on to be a private secretary. You had three successive ministers responsible for East and Central Europe, which actually came very much to be your area.

JM: Yes, it did. Unplanned, I have to say. I was selected to be Peter Blaker's private secretary. But whatever the subject area, it is valuable to work with ministers close to, and to see the Government/Parliament overlap at first hand.

CM: Since you were private secretary to three of them, Blaker, Rifkind, who was a subsequent Foreign Secretary, and Lord Trefgarne, perhaps you'd like to do a little compare and contrast of how they handled their brief and what you found interesting and what the challenges were.

JM: They were three very different people. I was lucky to have three. Ministers move on. Indeed I was for a week Nick Ridley's private secretary. He was delightful, incidentally. We talked about art - he was a rather good watercolourist. A junior minister is in a fairly undecided kind of position in the hierarchy. It depends on their relationship with the Secretary of State; it depends on the Secretary of State's willingness to bring in the team, or unwillingness. But you are nevertheless the ministerial point of contact for the departments for which you are responsible. That means that when a submission comes up on any of the issues that you are dealing with, you've then got to decide whether the junior minister can

decide this himself or whether it has to be passed up the line. There were quite a number of issues – I recall with Peter Blaker, the raising of the bus fare in Hong Kong. (Extraordinary reflection on how Hong Kong operated in those days, that the bus fare was something that was decided by British ministers.) Peter Blaker was born in Hong Kong; he knew Hong Kong backwards and so we took the decision on the bus fares.

It teaches you about Parliament, because ministers are the government's parliamentary front line. When FCO is top for questions - comes round about once a month - your minister may have to handle it. This is the way they do it. The Secretary of State may or may not take some questions, but the others will be passed to the junior ministers responsible. You get rapid insight into whether your minister is a good parliamentary performer or not. Peter Blaker, who was a nice man and helpful to me, had been in the Office himself before he went into politics and so he knew civil service procedure very well, (the Office's methodology had not changed greatly since the 50s). But he was a nervous parliamentary performer. He tended to get into a flurry if the unexpected arose, for all the 'only if raised' and 'if absolutely necessary' points in his briefing, always difficult to find in the heat of the moment.

Fortunately, he didn't have to deal with much that was controversial, so the shortage of the dramatic skills needed by a good minister in Parliament didn't greatly matter.

Peter Blaker was appointed Secretary of State for Defence, and so had a respectable senior ministerial career.

When Malcolm Rifkind arrived: quite different. First of all, he was brilliant at handling paper economically. He would say, 'I really don't need to read that. I won't bother about that. I will bother about this.' And if he did bother about it, he was right on the top of the issue. He had a wonderful memory. He came out of the Scottish system where – I know it from my own family – if you were a priest you had to give a sermon without a single note in front of you. Malcolm's skills had been honed in debating clubs at the University of Edinburgh. He didn't need a note in front of him; he'd remember the structure of his speech. He was respected by the Secretary of State, then Francis Pym. Malcolm had got himself into the position of being an *interlocuteur valable* for the ministerial team. He was good at the people handling side too. Above all, he was quick in Parliament; he could deal with aggressive questioning. That was a very valuable lesson. We were not together that long. I must have seen out most time with Lord Trefgarne. Malcolm was moving up the ladder fast, first to Defence Secretary, and latterly of course Foreign Secretary. We are exactly the

same age and we have remained in touch. I have the greatest respect for him as a parliamentary operator and a bureaucrat too. I didn't have a lot to do with him when he was Secretary of State, which was when I was away in Germany and Poland.

Last of all David Trefgarne, in the Lords, rather than the Commons. The Lords is a much politer place and in the normal run of things doesn't matter so much. But you have not to make a complete ass of yourself. Lord Trefgarne had a wonderful way, a rather Churchillian style of speaking. He could deliver the most deadpan 'line to take' as though it was something of real significance. He had all the Lords' verbiage with it. And he was liked and respected. So we had a rather successful run, before I moved to Soviet Department, and he to a junior ministerial post in the Department of Health.

As for Communist central Europe, with Malcolm I went to Romania and Bulgaria, Ceausescu in full control in Romania, though we luckily missed the honour of meeting the great dictator. We saw some perfectly *sortable* ministers who knew their lines, but it was not an event that was going to produce anything. It gave us a chance that gave us a sniff of Romania and to see the painted churches of Bukovina which are one of the great artistic creations of central Europe. Bulgaria was a bit more of a challenge. Dickie Stagg (later High Commissioner in India) was the Embassy's junior political leg man. He spoke beautiful Bulgarian and got into serious trouble because he had been walking on a mountain near Sofia, notionally off limits, and had been arrested by the police who didn't believe he wasn't Bulgarian because his Bulgarian was so good (must be a spy etc.). The aftermath of that was still around. The next time I went to Bulgaria, Dickie was ambassador after the end of Communism. These ministerial visits to Central Europe under communism gave insight into the way that the Communist world operated which was helpful when I got onto Russia/Soviet Union where it mattered more. With David Trefgarne we went to Poland at a weird moment when Solidarity (in the brief period before it was declared an illegal organisation) were being asked to attend such meetings as formal talks between Minister Trefgarne and some junior Polish minister. There were these two silent figures from Solidarity at the end of the table, who must have been wondering what on earth was going on.

CM: Were they later significant figures?

JM: No, I don't think so. I did get to know significant figures, but that was more because Judith was the Poland desk officer and we got to know the Onyszkiewicz, for instance - subsequently Defence Minister in free Poland and earlier a major figure in Solidarity, in

London. However these somewhat flat ministerial exchanges were important in the Communist era, for the fact that they happened at all.

CM: John, this might be the moment for us to bring Judith into it from your point of view, because it must have been around now (1982) that you married Judith Brown, a fellow diplomat, whose career has run parallel with yours and the two of you managed what had never been achieved before, both of you having a career in the Foreign Office right through to retirement.

JM: Yes, I was Private Secretary when I met Judith for the first time. She came to brief Peter Blaker on Poland and I thought, this is a very attractive and lively lady. She gave a very confident briefing. In 1982, still Private Secretary, by now to Lord Trefgarne, we were married in May that year. The initial phase was straightforward because we were both in London, in different departments, so we didn't pose any problems for the rules about working spouses. From then till '86 when I was posted to Prague, we were unproblematic as far as the Office was concerned.

CM: You were both working as civil servants in London...

JM: *Jein*, as the Germans say, because Judith started a long string of children so she was taking maternity leave for some of the time. She'll fill in her bits. She was FCO recruiter, and she and Ann Grant, her successor, were very important for the breakthrough of making it more widely clear that women and men were equally welcome in the FCO - the recruiter is the public face in universities, talking to groups of students. As far as I was concerned, apart from making us rather tired with interrupted nights, it was bureaucratically straightforward.

CM: We'll just make a note here that 1982 was when you got married and it was the start of a dual career, something that previous generations had not had.

JM: In the year I joined, Judith would have had to have resigned on marriage. Of course, that was well before this point, so there was no question of that, but there were many written and unwritten restrictions on what dual careerists could do, particularly abroad.

Speechwriter to Secretary of State, FCO, 1982-83

CM: After your two years as private secretary, you had a year as speech writer to Francis Pym and then Sir Geoffrey Howe. You were there writing the speeches for the Secretary of

State and that was your full-time job. You were looking at what was going on, the visits that were coming up, the speeches that had to be made?

JM: That sort of thing, yes.

CM: Clearly, it must be very important that you should be able to adapt yourself to the style of your Secretary of State. How did you manage that with these two different men?

JM: With Francis Pym I did have meetings to discuss themes. You don't get involved in everything. Internal political stuff you don't touch. That is for the parliamentary private secretary to deal with. You are therefore dealing with major statements of policy at significant events. I would say that it was a learning experience. We were in the aftermath of the Falklands War. I wrote two or three speeches for Pym. You co-operate with the department concerned with the particular forum or issue that you are dealing with. Sometimes they were helpful. Certainly they breathed a sigh of relief that at least they are not having to prepare the speech, because it is a notorious area for a depressing number of repeat drafts! My first one really was my brilliant success never to be repeated. It was a speech about dealing with the Soviet Union. I said some fairly standard things, frankly, about the need to recognise that there was a political gap between us and we were very concerned about the threats to peace, but you had to have a relationship, do deals and to work at this. This was fairly standard fare inside the Soviet Department, but it was nevertheless useful to have the Secretary of State say it. The next day, lo and behold, the first leading article of the Times had great slabs of my/his speech in it, saying what a good idea it was. Good on you, Pym.

CM: As opposed to Mrs Thatcher who was in her Iron Lady stage?

JM: Oh, Mrs Thatcher! Mission impossible to get speeches approved by Margaret Thatcher, I'm afraid. Drafts for her suffered ignominious returns and tended in the end to be more or less drafted by Charles Powell. Perhaps, putting it positively, it was useful to have the whetstone of an FCO draft to spark him off.

CM: What about Geoffrey Howe? He was famous for sending things back to departments with requests in tiny writing for further information.

JM: Yes. Niggle, niggle, and never accept anything as drafted. He had an enquiring mind, and was usually interested in the subject in hand, but he could not resist going down needless

side tracks, without that improving anything. His mind was tangential: his instinct was ask for more information about a subject, but rarely did the more information lead to anything that was not there in the beginning. It was good to have had that experience, but apart from my moment of glory with Pym, when the Private Secretary held up the leader from the Times, and cheered ... A bit of a relief when I moved on.

Assistant, Soviet Department, FCO, 1983-86

CM: Then you went on in 1983 to be Assistant in Soviet Department. This was really still Iron Lady, hard Cold War period, wasn't it?

JM: At the beginning. Ironically, in Soviet Department, we tended to draft any speeches touching on the Soviet Union. So I was occasionally back in the speech writing role!

CM: But you were in the Department for the Gorbachev visit in December 1984 when Mrs Thatcher said she could do business with him.

JM: Mrs Thatcher had decided that at the death of Andropov in February 1984 she was going to try to understand the Soviet Union better. She had moved on from the Empire of Evil. She attended the Andropov funeral, and met the successor Chernenko and had a delegation to delegation discussion with him after the obsequies. Chernenko was clearly not up to the task, and his staff nervous as ticks that he was going to say the wrong thing. For them, he had a disconcerting habit of nodding in apparent agreement to many of Mrs T's assertions. You could feel the drawing in of breath. Nevertheless, as so often with Russia, the symbolism is almost as important as the event and what was said at it; the fact was that the Iron Lady had come to Moscow and, as we discovered later, had made a strong positive impression. She proved a natural at East-West relations. She knew how to combine hard talk with just a bit of give at the edges. She used her soft side to great effect. The visit to Moscow won her a lot of respect – we learned through Gordievsky that she had been labelled as *serioznaya* by the KGB watchers – a great compliment in Russia. This was a good basis for her next move – to invite the coming man, Gorbachev, to the UK.

Although fate was to play a part – Chernenko would be dead in 11 months - Gorbachev's elevation to General Secretary was our punt, but far from guaranteed. But his position then as Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Supreme Soviet was sufficient in Soviet terms to justify the visit, as the guest of the Speaker of the House of Commons.

CM: You had prepared the visit and decided what he was going to do?

JM: With Nigel Broomfield, yes. It was complicated because of this question of equivalence. But the whole point of the exercise was for him to get to know Mrs Thatcher, and she was equally keen to have a proper discussion with him, not just a formal meeting. So the meeting was arranged to take place at Chequers. It went swimmingly. The informality of the house was ideal. At one stage the two sat on the floor surrounded by maps. There was sufficient ding dong for neither to be accused of pussy footing. But a lot of serious searching for new ways of handling East/West relations. They simply took to each other. Reformed Communism was hardly Mrs T's cup of tea, but she could see the potential for change in it. Gorbachev was clearly coming to recognise that an arms race was not something that the Soviet Union could afford. He did genuinely seem want to do something for the generality of the population and to reform Soviet domestic industry. From all this came Mrs T's famous phrase - 'a man we can do business with'. Her message to Reagan after the visit, which then led to Reagan engaging, and once Gorbachev was General Secretary, Reagan meeting Gorbachev. And from then on East/West relations were turned on their head. But it was that visit to the UK that started it.

Soviet relations were the key area where Mrs T respected the usefulness of the Foreign Office. This was our area of expertise and she recognised that we had it in spades, particularly in the FCO Research Department. And also very capable actors, like Head of Soviet Department, Nigel Broomfield himself, who could win her round. Domestic politics didn't get in the way.

CM: Among the professionals in your department who were dealing with the Soviet Union day by day, was there a positive reaction to Gorbachev?

JM: Oh yes, absolutely. The assessment was if only he could become General Secretary ... We recognised that as simply a member of the Praesidium - that only goes so far. His formal dossier was agriculture, though his Chequers meeting showed that he had thoughts about the whole range of policy. A key to his appointment was the view of the KGB establishment. We know from Gordievsky that the KGB weighed in for Gorbachev: it had been so humiliating to have Andropov dying within a year of his appointment, and then poor old Chernenko losing his place in his October Revolution speech. They were ready for a burst of fresh air and Gorbachev was the man to deliver. They didn't anticipate that he was going to embark on the radical things he did.

CM: And from the point of view of your department and the professionals, there wasn't a sense that we don't want a guy like this in charge? He's young, energetic and competent and that's going to make it all much worse for us.

JM: No, I don't think there was that. I never heard that reading of the situation. I think on the whole we thought it was more dangerous to have a very weak General Secretary and a lot of generals wanting to try out their weapons. All right, a deeply conservative, controlling system would probably have been able to sit on them at the end of the day, but we regarded good leadership as being helpful, once we had read the man.

One or two interesting indicators: Gorbi went up to Scotland with Malcolm Rifkind. I think Malcolm had fixed that one. But while he was in Edinburgh, the Defence Minister died; always a bit of an event in the Soviet Union when anyone dies in one of those senior offices. Normally, there's a dull silence for some time – usually to sort out the succession - as you then learn he died some time before. Anyway Gorbachev announced the death. This relatively junior member of the Praesidium of the Communist Party would normally have to clear his lines with absolutely everybody before making any announcement about anything. But he just did it. We realised that he was a person with the self-confidence in his own position, that he was able to do something right out of the norm in Scotland of all places, when the first news should have come from Moscow. You realised that here was somebody powerful enough to risk his hand. For the Soviet watchers it an important indicator.

CM: No, and you attended the Chernenko funeral. Tell us about that.

JM: What an event! Nigel very kindly ceded me his place. First of all, the whole thing could have been Czar Nicholas. It was completely another century. I happened to notice that the music played was all written before the Russian Revolution. When Russia gets into that mourning moment, they go back to roots.

CM: They had a bad relationship with composers during the Soviet period.

JM: As it happens, yes. If one sets aside Stalin, who was a special case as regards music, I think most of the Politburo of 1985 would have regarded even Prokofiev or Shostakovich as dangerous modern stuff. Whether ideologically, or just the noise of it, they liked to have the older music. Tchaikovsky was about where they'd got to. In other words, deeply old-fashioned. But you had to appreciate their professionalism at event management. The system must be legitimized by these events, and the moment – I saw it on TV at the Embassy

– Mrs Chernenko didn't operate according to plan because she bent down and embraced the corpse and burst into tears, everyone was looking very awkward about it. This man who was not built to be General Secretary and was mocked and laughed at, but perhaps enjoyed his domestic life and was decent to his wife. An unscripted, touching human moment.

That was that. Gorbachev was duly made General Secretary and in due course that changed everything in Russia, and changed everything for central Europe, which was relevant for me. My time in Soviet Department had been a ring side seat at events which were going to change history. Of course Mrs T's relationship with Reagan – his feeling that she was on his side - was crucial to this resetting of the clocks of East/West expectations.

CM: John, we've come to the end of your time in Soviet Department, so this might be a good point to break before you go to Prague.

Deputy Head of Mission, Prague, 1986-89

CM: This is the continuation of the interview of 18 November 2019 with John Macgregor for the British Oral History Programme. After a short break we are picking up the story in 1986 when you left London to become Deputy Head of Mission in Prague. We have had some conversation about your language learning and here we are with yet another.

JM: I was delighted to be learning my first Slav language. I like languages with case. Sir Cecil Parrot, ambassador in Prague in the 50s, who spoke several Slav languages, including Russian, said that Czech was the most complicated of them. So I knew it was going to be a bit of a challenge. However, Czechoslovakia, as it was at the time, seemed quite the greyest of the Communist central European countries. From the political point of view, uninteresting. Gustav Husák had been General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia since the aftermath of the Russian invasion in 1968 and he had been made President as well, so he was President and General Secretary; he was the dominant figure, trusted by Moscow. Things were not shifting. We had just had our second child and he was a tiny baby; we had other interests in life. So off we went to Prague. My trips with ministers responsible for Central Europe had only included the briefest visit to Prague. The first thing that struck us, that it was just eye-wateringly beautiful. The Embassy building is tucked just under the Castle where the President lives and dramatically that itself is on a hill, the Embassy on the same hill, but a bit lower down. Its garden is overlooked by the Castle. You're right in the middle of the old town. We lived on the other side of the River Vltava, a

bit downstream, in a villa which had belonged to a coal magnate in the pre-War era. That itself was a wonderful, strange building to live in. We came round to the fact that at least physically, life was going to be quite pleasant and we, unlike the Czechs at that time, had the possibility of leaving for Germany to do our shopping. We only rarely had to venture into Grocery No. 236 - alas, poor Czechoslovakia had been burdened with the worst of centralised retail planning. In the summer months, however, the ice cream stall at the Palace of Culture, as it was called then, was a magnet. This huge party conference hall was our next door neighbour. But we also had a very fine view down over the valley and to the river.

Those were our physical circumstances, as we arrived with two young children and wondering what we were going to do, because our political relationship with the Czechoslovak government was pretty inactive. There were no messages from government ministers to the government in Czechoslovakia. They were considered to be catspaws of the Russians. The whole history of 1968 and the fate of communism with a human face were still in people's minds, ours and the Czechs. The assumption was that the Czechs would do what the Russians told them to do and in return the Russians would make sure that the Czechs were, by the standards of the Eastern European countries, OK. When Russians came to Prague – you read this in several Russian autobiographies, the cellist Rostropovich's for instance – they thought the place was Paris, compared to Moscow. In Moscow there was just tinned fish in the food shop; in Prague Hungarian salami, and fresh meat. Rachel, our daughter, who was then two and a half, fell in love with Hungarian salami.

The function of the Embassy, and the British Council, was to 'keep hope and independent thinking alive'. There was plenty of time to take an interest in the language and the literature and the arts, because that mixture of Western Slavs, Germans and to some extent Italians had always been a crucible of creativity. The amount of good music that came out of the Czech lands during the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been quite disproportionate to their population. Dvořák, Smetana, Martinů, Janáček, Mahler, major figures in European music, all out of this small area. It certainly was worth learning Czech and, once you'd got to that stage, there were first class authors in Czech, also worth going to the theatre, because here they were allowed just a little bit of margin, so you might hear something interesting.

My ambassador, Stephen Barrett, had a heart attack when he was there, so he was in hospital for a long stretch. He chose to be hospitalised in Prague – he was very well looked after, incidentally, so the standard of medicine in the capital city was pretty good, but he wasn't

able to be the Head of Mission, so I was Chargé d’Affaires. Once Stephen had recovered and moved on to Poland, Laurence O’Keeffe was his successor. But Laurence was stuck in the finale of one of those CSCE, (Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe) then later OSCE (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe) meetings in Vienna and he was going to see that to its conclusion. He was appointed, but there was a long gap, so once again I was Chargé. I was very lucky to have spent so much of my time in charge.

I carried on with the language; I had two teachers, one of whom was a sportive tennis player, the other one was a former minister who had been “disgraced” in 1968 and had made a living on the side, in the way that was strangely possible in the Communist world. He was quite a litterateur and interested in art and a good person to be a guide at this time. Rather nicely, when we got onto our next post, he had been made a junior minister of trade, which is what he had been in 1968, and he came to Paris with a delegation. A wonderful encounter for both of us, he having jumped through the hoop of communism into another world.

One of our main priorities was to make sure we knew the dissident world. We had *carte blanche* at the time from London to behave with what the Czechs at the time would regard as provocative behaviour, having Václav Havel and Jiří Dienstbier, who became Foreign Minister later, round to our houses and got to know them and in many cases, admire. You never quite knew whether they were going to be able to come or whether they were going to be in prison that day. The prison sentences could be quite short, but painful for the individuals, and for us a nuisance because you could never plan anything with certainty. Through these contact we got to know who was who, and to introduce them to visiting British ministers, in my time, Tim Renton and later David Mellor.

It was the characteristic of Charter 77 that they consciously tried to behave like a serious opposition. In other words, they came up with quite well thought through papers on how the health service might be better run, and how the education service might be improved and so on and to have views on things which they agreed in a kind of cabinet. In spite of their circumstances, they were serious and Czechs are serious people. They also, later on in the story, turned out to have had endless dress rehearsals for what actually happened, i.e. that they would form a government. So they had already done a lot of thinking about how you do that, and how you do come up with policies and what sort of policies they are. We didn’t know that at the time; it all seemed rather fairyland, but nevertheless, one could not but admire them for taking the thing seriously and being a serious opposition. Interestingly,

Rudé Právo, the party newspaper, gave them, not deliberately, but incidentally, a surprising amount of coverage, because they mocked this, but by mocking it they had to say what it was. They would say, ‘What an extraordinary thing that people should get together and have a view on the shape of the health service in our country. The shape of our health service is absolutely right and has been set by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia; there is no better health service than that. But these preposterous people come up with some ideas of their own. Why are they bothering? Frankly, it’s a waste of their time.’ But by reading that, if you’re an intelligent person reading *Rudé Právo* you think, ‘That’s funny, what’s going on here?’ It’s the tendency of absolutist regimes to create rods for their own backs by the way they criticize people. Of course, one shouldn’t be too light-hearted about it, because it was a miserable business, personally, for a lot of those involved - as in other Communist countries and absolutist regimes, the family was used in order to put pressure on the individual. Just as Winnie Mandela was put in solitary confinement in order to put pressure on Nelson Mandela. Your kids are brilliant and obviously candidates to get into the best university, which was the Charles University in Prague, or perhaps to the best music academy, but they would never get in. They were just told that they weren’t up to standard. It was just a way of telling you that you are not going to get anywhere with all this opposition stuff. The authorities hoped that the children would reject their parents. I never heard that. I knew some modest folk who were related to the wife of the Anglican priest who came from time to time, a deeply suspicious couple, naturally. Some friends of hers whose kids were all talented musicians, never got an opportunity for higher training because they refused to stop going to church. Those very unpleasant personal restrictions were placed on people. I’m glad we had this long opportunity to see that sort of thing and realise what an evil society it was, maybe not evil in the sense of torturing people to death, but in limiting their opportunities so much. I played in a string quartet: the cellist was a nuclear physicist who hadn’t done a minute’s work on nuclear matters since 1968; the violinist a mathematician who hadn’t done any maths since the early 70s, and so on. This was the second life they led and with which they survived and about which they were remarkably, touchingly, humorous. That was communism seen on the inside and I was glad to have had these insights into it, at a personal level.

We were there from ’86 to ’89. People who write history who say that the events of the Velvet Revolution of the end of ’89 were all perfectly predictable. I think that’s very much not true. The difference between ’68 and ’89 was that the Russians were not going to send in

tanks and they were not going to give the local communist government a free hand to kill demonstrators. I am afraid that, had they killed a lot of demonstrators, things would have probably petered out in a very grumbly way. There's always the question of whether the soldiers will fire the bullets and so on, so you never know. But I don't think it was foregone conclusion.

CM: Was there a certain amount of momentum from what was happening elsewhere that made it feel inevitable?

JM: Ah, I am coming on to that, because it was precisely those things that began to make things untenable for the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The Berlin Wall fell in early November '89. Because of the events in Berlin, by the time you get to this crucial period in the middle of November in Prague, things were shifting and it was obvious that the Russians weren't willing to play the part of Big Brother and just come in and just settle the thing in the style of what they did in 1953, when there was a workers' uprising in the GDR. Very important, though it was difficult to interpret its effects at the time, in September 1989, some East Germans who had been on holiday in Hungary, in a lemming-like way, just decided that they weren't going to go back to the GDR and they would stop off in at the West German Embassy in Prague – most unwelcome to the Czechs, needless to say. 1500 of them turned up in Prague in September '89 in their Trabant, those iconic East German-made, minimalist cars, and leaving their cars behind, made their way up the hill to the West German Embassy which was a substantial palace, but not for so many. If you were a working man in the GDR, you had to save for six to ten years to get a Trabant – they just left them in the street. Once they got into the West German Embassy, they were only allowed to have one suitcase per family, so you got these tear-jerking scenes of these cars, so long saved up for, with teddy bears in the back, because they couldn't get them into the suitcase. It was a definitive move they were making; not a gesture; they were throwing everything away for a better life, they hoped. Judith and I used to go and visit the West German Embassy and it was Germany at its very best. They were very organised. They had not got room for anything more than the bare minimum for 1500 people. There was a grand staircase inside and you had a third of a stair as your bed; in the middle was a transit area and the other third was another person, so on each step two people and a place you could go up in the middle. There were tents all over the garden, provided by the German Red Cross. All this was allowed and facilitated by the Czechs. Fortunately, it was not too late in the year, so it wasn't freezing cold. Meanwhile, negotiations were going on between Chňoupek, the Czechoslovak Foreign Minister, and

Genscher, the then German Foreign Minister; it took some time but eventually it was agreed that all these people could be put on trains; it took you back to 1945 and what happened after the War, vast population movements of displaced people in trains. Anyway, they all got into trains. At the insistence of the East German authorities, the train had to be routed so that it went briefly through the GDR. Not easy, because that's not the way the main tracks ran. The first couple of trains took this route, in order that the East German authorities could cancel their passports on GDR territory. However other East Germans rushed forward to get on the train. This was the moment they'd been waiting for. So the next trains did not go to the GDR.

Meanwhile the Czechs and the GDR had closed the border between them, and communist fraternal solidarity went out of the window. But then there was a second wave. Once the rumour got round among the holiday-makers in Hungary that you could get out via the West Germany Embassy in Prague, another 1500 turned up, leaving their Trabants. It was just a wonderful thing to have witnessed. Very moving. The interesting thing was that in order to get onto the train, they had to get onto buses. A thousand people in buses, quite a lot of buses, going down from the West German Embassy, which is in the baroque part of the town, not the obvious place to handle a large number of people, narrow streets, cobbled streets, and so on. You'd have thought that there would have been some kind of public demonstration from the Czechs about this. The East Germans were fairly unloved. They were known in local patois as 'Germans without hard currency.' We went out to see the departures, and there was little reaction. People looked out of their windows, curious, but unmoved. It's wrong, as some commentators have said, to say that these events somehow caused a spring to snap in the Czechs leading two months later to their revolution. It was more that at the end of the day the Russians were willing to see all this happen without doing anything about it. Their non-reaction was probably why it was possible for a peaceful people's revolution to throw away communism within ten days.

There had been a number of demonstrations in 1989. There was an ecological demonstration in the autumn, but the authorities had dealt with that sort of thing before and it didn't lead to more than the police mopping up some of the leaders of the demonstration and the majority going home again. It didn't really threaten the body of the state. The crucial weekend in November did.

On the Friday, 17 November, we were getting into the last few weeks of our posting and we had arranged to have a lot of dissidents around to have supper with us, which we'd done at fairly regular intervals throughout our time and we made a special effort for this. Havel was away in the country so he didn't come, but the major figures from Charter 77 did. That was the night that the student demonstration in the university had turned in to a mass march. They went to the Old Castle which was on our side of the river and there was a very large gathering and I joined them. They were saying, 'What shall we do?' Difficult to consult with so many people, but some way or another it was simply decided that they would march to Wenceslas Square, which is the place where everything happens that matters in Czechoslovak history. A very large number of people, I guess thousands certainly, started marching from the Old Castle down the hill and then along the river. As they did that, and I was walking along with them, you noticed that people were getting off trams and joining in. Previously when there had been small demos, the general public paid little attention, and appeared not to want trouble. Here the tram drivers were opening the tram doors, people getting out, joining the march. They went down the river, just short of the Charles Bridge, turned up into the town, past the National Theatre. At the National Theatre, the ladies who took your coats - they were really the most stony-faced, disobliging communist stooges you could imagine; no smile at all, and there they were, up on the gallery of the Theatre, all cheering. I couldn't believe it. We got into Národní, which leads to Wenceslas Square, and the riot police had then blocked it, armed with shields and truncheons. The demonstration, several thousand strong, sat down.

Then I stepped out of the story, because we were having the dinner for the dissidents. I was right up at the front and I just said to the soldier, 'Sorry, I'm a diplomat and I need to get to an event. Could you let me through please?' In a way this tells you something about extremism in reality: the soldier just said, 'Step through here.' Then he put his shield back again. We had our dinner. Up to then when entertaining dissidents, we always used to make it and serve it ourselves, so that our staff weren't under pressure to report to the police - but we had decided that as we were at the end of our time, we'd just do a more normal thing, and the result was quite a lot of dialogue between our own staff, the waiters, and the dissidents. The dissidents were being asked whether their kids were going to be OK, things like this. There was a feeling in the air which was quite different from anything we had witnessed before. And then Edward Lucas, who now writes for the *Economist* and the *Times*, a great friend of ours, had stayed on a bit longer at the demo and when the police had

finally broken it up, knocked him on the head. He arrived rather bloody at the dinner, a bit late, and one could see that it hadn't been a completely peaceful thing. That very evening, a rumour was circulating that a student, Martin Schmidt, had been killed by the police. In those hermetically sealed communist systems that kind of rumour causes all sorts of problems. On the TV the announcer was saying that several students called Schmidt had been interviewed and here they are: various people were rolled out saying, 'I am from the faculty of Mathematics and I'm Schmidt and I'm fine, standing here.' When a regime is deeply untrusted, such denials are never believed - the idea that someone had been killed was around and it gave an extra tension to the moment. Over the weekend, the show just rolled on and on, not in an organised way, just thousands of people in and around Wenceslas Square. The authorities had just given up trying to stop people going to Wenceslas Square, which would have been impossible anyway. Demonstrators tried to march up to the Castle, which is on the other side of the river, and the police blocked that successfully. But on the town side, things just got a momentum of their own. Representatives of Charter 77 came in and they did their usual thing. They got their Cabinet together and they said, 'This is a turning point and we are here.' They started organising things. The Theatre Union backed them, so all the theatres became places that you could freely enter, and have political discussions. The Laterna Magika theatre, in the centre of town, became the HQ of the Revolution. That went on through the week, with thousands of people milling around. Judith and I and the children were there. Rachel can still remember the overwhelming feeling, to her at the age of five, of those huge crowds. She'd never been in anything like it before. Very peaceful. The communist youth magazine offices, which had a big building in Wenceslas Square with a gallery which was used for communist speechifying. But the communist youth movement had changed sides, and were letting ordinary people, dissidents, Chartists, address the crowd. Soon thousands of national flags began to appear. These were kept in scruffy offices called 'agitation centres'. Normally dead as a dodo, but they had flags in abundance for official national and Party celebrations. Students broke into the agitation centres and took all the national flags, so that the place was awash, with people bearing flags and singing the (pre-communist) national anthem.

A lovely extra to this: that weekend a British girls' school choir had come to Prague for a short singing tour. Arranged weeks before these dramatic events, I had written for them a setting in four female parts of the Czechoslovak national anthem to end their concert with a nice local touch. These girls, they must have a story to tell themselves about this, because

they went round Prague. Their music teacher decided that they might as well give an outing to the national anthem, as set by Macgregor. They became the most popular show in town. People who hadn't heard them before said, 'Sing it again over here. Do it under the old town clock.' They just went on singing the national anthem until they were hoarse. It was just a crazy weekend. The Charter 77, announced a general strike a week on Monday (27 November), so there was time to organise it. It would last for one hour, so as not seriously to interrupt production. It would be at 12 midday.

I should just finish off the dinner. The general view was that the dreadful Mr Jakeš, who was then the General Secretary of Communist Party, could not carry on and there would be a Gorbachev-like reformist movement within the Communist Party. No one was talking about communism coming to an end. They were just talking about personnel changes in certain posts. These were the dissidents and Chartists themselves. In other words, what happened was not a Charter 77 inspired revolution, welcome though it certainly was. They came to our dinner. If they'd really thought that Communism was about to end, they would have been elsewhere. There was something of a mystery about it. Certainly students were the key. It was the way perhaps that these things go; there's a tendency, something is released and it starts moving. Of the next week, which was going to be crucial, the old hands warned that students and intellectuals made revolutions, but workers don't necessarily join in. Would this attract the workers' movement? Nobody knew. Another piece of the complicated puzzle fell into place: the Catholic Cardinal of Czechoslovakia, František Tomášek, wrote a letter to all parishioners, in very straight terms, saying, 'This is your moment. We can bring communism to an end. We can bring back a better life in which religion will have a proper place in society.' The Church, which was tolerated by the regime, had been allowed to have its own network of communication and this message got out into the sticks, as well as the big towns. Meanwhile, everyone just waited for the general strike. I think talks had not yet begun with the opposition; it was the next week that the Politburo resigned, but they were talking about talks. Monday 27th came and I walked down from the Embassy to Wenceslas Square. The trams all bore a scruffy little notice saying, 'This is an information sheet from the Tram-Drivers' Union.' In the stiff language they use: 'The Tram-Drivers met at half past three this morning and they voted unanimously to observe the strike for only five minutes at five to twelve, because people will want to come to the demonstration and we have to bring them.' This was an official workers' organisation - it was an important signal. At 12, it was standing room only in Wenceslas Square; in the

middle of the event, a lorry arrived, pulled on ropes by the workers from the enormous engineering factory just outside Prague, CKD. Sitting on top of it was a papier maché model of the General Secretary of the Communist Party with a rope around his neck. You realised that it was over. If you can get CKD, symbolic of the workers, to come out, that was game set and match. Talks continued between the Communist Government and the Chartists, and a hand over to an interim government of all the talents agreed. We were there for another week, just short of Havel being elected President. It had all happened in that very short period of time.

What an honour to be there. In a career in which you never know what you're going to bump into, to see Mrs Gandhi defeated in India in the '70s and the '89 revolution - I had my fair share of good luck. A front seat in the stalls at two of the great political dramas of the 20th century.

Head of Chancery, Paris, 1990–93

CM: You went from this excitement and three years in Prague to Paris. Quite a contrast.

JM: Yes, very different, almost dull, if one can ever say that of Paris.

CM: It was 1990 and you went as Head of Chancery; you were living in the Gatehouse on the Faubourg St Honoré, at the entrance to the Ambassador's Residence. You were really living over the shop. Was that a nice place to live?

JM: Except in mid-summer, yes. It was quite unbearably hot then, because there was no movement of air. Yes, it was good to be there. And very kindly, Ewen Fergusson, when they weren't in residence, they said our children could play in their garden, so we had a large garden available and in the summer we took full advantage of it. It was a good location and it was a good Embassy.

CM: You were Political Counsellor. Who was President and Prime Minister at that time?

JM: It was President Mitterrand the whole time. The Prime Ministers came and went: Rocard, to start with, a nice man. Perhaps pleasant people don't make successful prime ministers. Certainly he was not a natural fit with Mitterrand. As you know, there was a tendency for the President to throw out the Prime Minister regularly, by way of showing some notional change, of which there wasn't very much actually. Rocard was very competent and honest, a typical French Protestant. Then it was Madame Cresson, which was

a stupid appointment. Had she been a competent woman, that would have been interesting, but she was not. She was just a Mitterrand place-woman, probably an ex-mistress. Mitterrand was still going reasonably strong then. He was not into his final weakened years when he was suffering from cancer so badly he could hardly get around. At this stage, it was French business as usual. My colleague on the economic side kept railing against the fact that France was seemingly doing so well economically when they were doing all the wrong things in their policies. It was a fairly golden period for France. The politics was reasonably stable. The third Prime Minister after Mme Cresson, was Bérégovoy, who was another honest man, because when the story got round that he had been helped by a friend of the Party, to buy a flat in Paris and that had not been properly accounted for, he shot himself. Ineffably sad. He was not only an honest man, but an honourable one - he just felt that he could not live with this accusation against him. He was also a very nice person, and like Rocard, easy to talk to. I had opportunities to talk to both of them, *comme ça*, and they were very straightforward, but thoughtful, people.

Underlying it, the Mitterrand relationship with Mrs Thatcher was a very tenuous thing. You know, there had been this rather ill-judged effort by Mrs T to get Mitterrand to join the no-sayers against German reunification. The record shows that Mitterrand simply said that this is something that's going to happen; frankly, get used to the idea. But the interpretation, nevertheless, at the time was that maybe – and this would be very Mitterrand-like – he was trying to get Mrs T to say things to him which he could use as tools in his relationship with the Germans, to get a better deal out of it, as he saw French interests. That would be very Mitterrand, at his most fox-like.

CM: And you were actually there for the famous Paris moment when she said she would fight on?

JM: Well, we were not only there, we were almost the only people around who'd actually heard what she said, because we had the radio in the kitchen in the Gatehouse. There was a little balcony in the kitchen and we could see it all going on down at the bottom, but on the radio we could hear her being interviewed.

CM: On the steps of the Residence?

JM: She wasn't on the steps; she was in the middle of the courtyard and there was a big gaggle of journalists around her.

CM: This was when the news had come through that she hadn't got an absolute majority; it was 20 November 1990?

JM: Yes, that's right, and what was she going to do? And she said, 'I'm going to fight on.' It turned out that I was the only person on the official side who had heard what she said.

Obviously, it was picked up quickly by the press, but I was able to go out and enlighten the officials. It was a dramatic moment of British politics.

CM: You say in your notes that you worked with Judith on the State visit in Paris, so you not only had Mrs Thatcher, you had the Queen visiting.

JM: At the top ministerial level, the political relationship was not easy. So the State Visit was the big event of our time. Judith in her interview will have mentioned breaking through the glass ceiling preventing one of a diplomatic couple working for another in Prague. Well, we repeated it in Paris. She had come as an accompanying spouse, but at a certain point Ewen said (Sir Ewen Fergusson, HM Ambassador to France 1987-1982) I think we need to have somebody, not just the political internal officer who was Val Caton and busy on the internal political dossier, but somebody else, to do the nitty-gritty of the royal visit, because those things need to be prepared and stage-managed perfectly. So Judith and Matthew Rycroft, who was the Second Secretary in the Chancery back room, became the team, and were a great success in it. It gave them a wonderful ring-side seat, because one of them, plus the very competent Protocol officer from the Quai who was Judith's pair, always have to be either ahead or just behind to anticipate everything, to make sure everyone is in position, to make sure it really is Monsieur Somebody or other who is standing number one in the row. It's for her to talk about that, but it was very well done. Perhaps as a result, and not entirely a co-incidence, because I am sure Ewen stage-managed it, Diana then made her first solo visit to a country, to Paris, at the end of that same year and Judith performed the same role for Diana. That gave our time in Paris a glow which we had not been expecting. After her *annus horribilis*, the Queen had said how happy she had been with the visit. And one has to say Mitterrand made a great effort with the Queen. He had a reputation for being quite disengaged from some talks, particularly with Brits. He didn't speak any other language except French, but the Queen, who speaks rather nice French, was able to put him at his ease, and a real dialogue developed. They did use the nice Christopher Thierry, Mitterrand's interpreter, for longer conversations, but he, a consummately discreet and capable man, was able to enter into the spirit of the dialogue.

Diana wasn't fluent. The French, rather intelligently, because they were keen to make it work, and because Diana made such public vibrations at that time, put up Bernard Kouchner to look after her, who was English-speaking and did the sort of thing that Diana was interested in, her landmines initiative, her HIV work (and of course Kouchner had been a doctor). Both those visits went very well and we ended up with quite a lot of glory at the end of 1992.

Head of EU Department (External), FCO, 1993–95

CM: You'd had two postings abroad, one after the other. You left London in '86 and you were coming back in '93, so you'd been abroad for seven years. Were you looking forward to coming home, or was it a bit of a shock, returning to London?

JM: I think it was a bit of a shock, really. I was Head of European Department External and there was plenty of interesting content to it, above all the question of enlargement of the European Economic Community. At that particular moment the Austria-Finland-Sweden enlargement was in the bag and settled for 1994. There was little more to do than gain the necessary British parliamentary ratification. The difficult debate was round the next enlargement.

CM: But it was something the British were pushing for?

JM: Rightly, in my view, we pushed for it. We were in the lead.

CM: Wasn't it wider not deeper?

JM: That wider would stop it going deeper? Yes, I think that idea was being mentioned in the corridors. But there were also British debts to repay, you could say, Munich and Yalta. We owed it to Central Europe to give them a leg-up after 40 years of communism. The leg-up they wanted was to join Europe.

CM: But looking at it from the East European point of view, not to mention our own interest, they were so keen to join. It gave them a goal and a structure; the extraordinary thing is that they didn't fall into authoritarianism and inflation and disaster. They had a structure and a goal to aim for.

JM: Yes, I think it was very important that they had that. And getting ready for membership did impose disciplines and requirements which helped them get some pretty bitter but necessary medicine through their parliaments.

CM: And you made some memorable visits?

JM: Yes, one of the parts of the job was to get round, particularly the candidate countries and talk to them about what real life was like inside the EEC, with a British spin, naturally. As a result, because they were indeed keen to put themselves over in a positive light, I saw quite senior people. They weren't people who lasted until the moment of accession, because they all suffered from various ups and downs in their national politics. It was a good moment to do what in effect became a preparation for being Ambassador in Poland, when again these were the issues: When will Poland join? Are they fit to join? And so on. Having gone through that argument - Can Polish agriculture manage membership of the CAP without impoverishing it, because there were so many small farmers? How could you adjust it in such a way that you could cater for the Polish farmers in an affordable way? Those were interesting and worthwhile questions.

I went back to Prague, by then capital of the Czech Republic. Slovakia was being run by an absolutist former Communist and was not on the road to Europe. It wasn't until Dzurinda was Slovak Prime Minister, leading a precarious but motivated multi-party coalition, that they quickly got their act together, and happily were able to join the 2004 intake. I did go to Prague and to Warsaw and the Baltics, but the most important of these was to lead a small FCO/Treasury/MAFF delegation to Poland to look at the agricultural situation and how to make things compatible with the CAP without bankrupting the Policy - the problem I have already mentioned. We did get some way towards de-dramatising the UK view of the problem.

Otherwise the biggest issue in EUDE at that time was bringing the GATT round to a positive conclusion; we, the Department of Trade and the Treasury had to agree the key inputs into the UK position, and this involved a constant dialogue with UKREP Brussels, and they with the Commission who negotiated on behalf of the member states. And the background drum beats were our debates with the Treasury about how much Eastern enlargement was going to cost, and a reluctance on their part to get fully on board with 'We're in favour of Eastern enlargement.' They also saw the potential danger to our budget rebate from the entry of a wave of poorer countries. It was a quite a struggle in Whitehall to come up with a sensible

line. It was also a nervy time in Parliament; the bruises of the Maastricht debate were still fresh, with the potential to infect other EU issues. So we had to be on our toes.

CM: Then, John, unless there is something else you would like to say, I think this is a good moment to break and we will take up recording in our next session with your postings as Head of Mission to Germany, Poland and Austria.

Today is the 2nd March 2020 and this is the third interview with John Macgregor for the British Diplomatic Oral History Programme, Catherine Manning recording.

Director General for Trade Promotion in Germany and Consul-General, Düsseldorf, 1995–98

CM: John, we are starting in 1995 when you finished as Head of EU Department External in the Foreign Office and you went to be Director General for Trade Promotion in Germany, covering the whole of Germany, and Consul General in Düsseldorf.

JM: I very much wanted to have a commercial angle to my career and so I was watching out for a job of this kind to come up. I was keen to go to Germany, too, so this fitted.

CM: You were already a German speaker.

JM: I had done some German; I did some more German for the job. When I got there I would say I was half-fluent in German and it got better as I went on. The way that our representation in Germany was then structured was that the main Embassy was in Bonn. There was in '95 a growing office in Berlin, and there were already a series of Consulates General around Germany, covering commercial matters. The choice was made for Düsseldorf to be the epicentre of the circle of commercial posts, the Directorate General for Trade and Investment Promotion, the investment being quite an important element in it, because we were trying to encourage German companies to invest in the UK, at the same time as simply promoting the sale of British goods in Germany. In order to give the UK based staff diplomatic status, Düsseldorf was in German protocol terms a 'Consulate General'; and all commercial representatives were consuls general. The big job was the one in Düsseldorf. And I was Consul General for North Rhine Westphalia, which at that time was a very important *land* in Germany politically, and traditionally a high percentage of

German industrial production came from North Rhine Westphalia. It was beginning to shift, but still it was an important place. Düsseldorf was known as ‘the writing table of the Ruhrgebiet’, *schreibtisch*, because it was a major centre of banking, insurance and general financial support for German industry. I think that, given the circumstances of that time, and we knew the Embassy would be shifting from Bonn to Berlin, it was a sensible place to be and to remain, so that we had a fairly large footprint in the west of Germany. The job was interesting because it enabled me to find out how Germany really ticked, and take its pulse. Industry still pulled in some of the best of German minds. You wanted to meet somebody who was interested in art: they had wonderful art hanging in their headquarters; music: playing the violin in their spare time: you’d find that in German industry. I found that stimulating as well as professionally useful. I gradually went round all the major industrial centres and met the - very impressive, on the whole – chief executives or presidents (they had different names in different companies) and I learned a lot from them. It also made them focus, for that day, on their UK interests. I always conducted the meeting in German: I found that got me into a different relationship with them. That was really the essence of the job so far as contact with individual companies was concerned.

The other major element of it was German trade fairs. They’re massive and everybody who was interested in the speciality of that trade fair would go to Germany. Our business, of course, was to help the British companies who came. My staff was there to create opportunities for them to meet people in promising fields with which they might have more dealings. The buzz of these fairs was striking. Obviously, trade fairs in China and the Far East have, to some degree, taken part of that territory from German control, but they remain places for people to meet each other, do business. There was a tendency on the part of the organisers to want to show that a piece of business had been done at the fair, so that something would be signed and the head of the trade fair would be present and some publicity for it to show that it was, as it were, worth going; so created for the interests of both sides,

Apart from that, it was really a question of taking account of what would be the new shape of Germany. Where should we be represented and how in the future once the Embassy moved to Berlin? What would be the opportunities in the new eastern *laender*? I made quite a lot of visits to the new *laender*, together with the small staff we had in Berlin responsible for commercial relations. One could see that things had a long way to run. What was happening in that part of Germany at the time was a lot of construction, focussed on one or

two main cities which were blossoming: Leipzig, Dresden, cities that had been in the communist part of Germany. A lot of motorways were built. The German approach was that you needed to be able to communicate and you needed to be able to carry goods around, hence the logic of building motorways. But in smaller towns one could see that there was a long way to go. One tended to call on a local economic senior official, nearly always a West German, who was part of the effort by the German government to modernise East Germany. I don't want to come to a final view of whether those investments in roads and those people operating inside Germany was the best way of doing things, but it didn't produce the economic miracle that was hoped for by the central government: a thousand flowers were taking their time to bloom.

CM: Was it that by fixing one ostmark to one deutschmark they lost the benefit of cheap labour?

JM: That was certainly one of the reasons. I think they also underestimated the degree to which people would be able, quickly, to change themselves from a control economy to one in which the whole thing was in their hands. They were not natural small-scale business operators. Well, that's how West Germany worked. The best of West Germany was the so-called *mittelstand*, the small- and medium-sized companies who are tremendously productive, flexible, often in the same family for a long time. It simply didn't exist in the East. The Government hoped that somehow they would pop up but they didn't, at least to the degree necessary to create a burgeoning economy.

CM: Did people think that the history of that area, going back into the 19th century, was less entrepreneurial and business-oriented than the West, or that forty five years of Communism had very much influenced the culture of East Germany?

JM: I think more the latter than the former. Communism knocked the stuffing out of East Germany and of course a lot of people emigrated. If they had get-up-and-go, the one thing they thought was how can I get to West Germany? There are many figures in pre-1989 West Germany who came from the East: they were 20th century Junkers and Prussians. It was always going to take a long time to achieve an economic balance between West and East, more than a single generation, and politics is never done in that timescale. It's unsurprising that it's in the eastern half of the country that the problem of the extreme Right has emerged; it's not completely absent in the west but nevertheless it is certainly more present in the east, partly because of resentment at what they would say was the condescending attitude of West

Germans towards them; it felt to me, as an outsider, like a denial of their history, because it was, after all, two generations who grew up under Communism; now missing that great social net which picked everybody up. You wouldn't be a beggar on the street in the GDR – well, it would be illegal to be a beggar on the street, as it happens! This loser mentality has certainly fed East German political attitudes – many feel out in the cold.

CM: How did that play out in your work? When you visited the eastern Laender did your words fall on stony ground or did you have some areas of success?

JM: We had some areas of success. We had two major investors in East Germany which were created by a lot of good lobbying by Sir Christopher Mallaby, who by that time was in Paris, but when he was Ambassador in Germany, he put quite a lot of effort into trying to make sure we did get into East Germany. But it was literally a couple of major companies, so it was hardly dominating. For the rest, really it was looking to see what these economic chiefs from the towns thought was the kind of thing they were trying to do and how UK inward investment into Germany would fit into that. Not deaf ears, but it didn't add up to terribly much at that stage.

I think, all in all, the German experience for me was a tremendous education. I learned a lot about Germany; I could certainly speak better German at the end than I could at the beginning. I knew a lot of the senior businessmen and I appreciated their qualities very highly, and I appreciated the way Germany operated when it came to taking trade delegations overseas: much more thorough than our arrangements for doing the same thing.

During that time I saw from a distance what turned out to be a bit of a disaster, but nevertheless, fascinating to see it all happening, which was Siemens coming to Newcastle to create, from nothing, a state of the art computer chip factory. Seeing the way that Siemens approached it was a revelation. They had people go into junior schools in Newcastle to see what the future held. They helped secondary schools to underline the importance of engineering for the future economy. Again engineering, the route to the top in Germany, but not necessarily the route to the top in the UK. They really took trouble over everything, thought and prepared long-term. Unfortunately, the market dropped out of computer wafers and they were completely overtaken and outpriced by Asian production which was just coming on stream at the time, so it was an initiative which died within very few years. A pity, because it would have been a wonderful contribution to the Newcastle economy.

It was a fascinating from a personal point of view to see the way that Berlin was developing - there was still a lot of money going into Berlin then. The major public buildings were growing like mushrooms; the cupola of the Bundestag was going up. Norman Foster and I went up the staircase before the roof was on, so we were in the snow up there on the staircase. It was quite something to see. When I go back there now you think, My goodness! I was here at the beginning of this. I went into the Reichstag, as it had been, before all the seating was there; it was just an empty building, pock-marked with bullet holes. There were many good moments of that kind.

CM: Just thinking about that, would you say that it was at that kind of level, the top end creative level, that Britain was making its contribution, or making its mark? Or were there other areas that are less well known?

JM: Well, that was a very visible contribution by a well-known British architect, but Germany has always had a respect for art, architecture from outside.

CM: One thinks of Chipperfield and the Museum Island in Berlin.

JM: The Neues Museum, that's wonderful. I've never met a German interested in the artistic world who doesn't think that was a brilliant idea: leaving the bullet marks in the Museum and the patches where the plaster was blown off in the great final battle. It gives it a completely different message from just erecting a modern museum with all the wonderful collection that was left. In Düsseldorf itself Sir Tony Cragg, the British sculptor was Professor at the Kunstakademie, and a towering figure. Many of his major works are in Germany, including in the atrium of the new British Embassy in Berlin. We had a Howard Hodgkin exhibition in Düsseldorf; we had a Richard Long exhibition, stone shapes and landscapes, very much in tune with German artistic fashion at the time, in which Britain had a very distinguished place. The first successful performance of Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* took place in Düsseldorf in 1901. I attended a 95th anniversary performance of the work in the wonderful – fortunately it survived the war intact – concert hall in nearby Wuppertal. There are some tremendous links between that part of Germany and Britain, so you were always being surprised and pleased about the degree to which we were part of the scene.

Also during that time was the gradual drawdown of the British Army of the Rhine. When I arrived there was still a major British military presence in Germany and their headquarters was in Rheindahlen, along the road from Düsseldorf. They were an integral part of our

relationship with the Germans and Düsseldorf itself had a vast housing estate in which British military personnel had been living. That was gradually being sold off during my three years there. Quite an emotional experience.

Ambassador to Poland, 1998–2000

CM: You were there for three years. Was one applying for jobs by then? Did your next job, as Ambassador to Poland, just come up at the right time and you were able to apply for it?

JM: I had done my three years in Düsseldorf, so I was watching out for possibilities for which I was matched. I applied for Poland, which had come up at the last minute. I had been working largely with what was then the Department of Trade and Industry and I needed to get my foot back into the Foreign Office again. I had made a bit of a speciality of the Communist and ex-Communist world, so I was delighted to get the job. .

CM: The Slav languages may be a group, but they're not the same. Did you have to go on another language course?

JM: It was a bit improvised, because time was so short. Yes, I rapidly realised that though the basic grammar roots are the same, Polish is different (and Poles feel different!). I had only been doing Polish for about six weeks, but I risked conducting my call on the President in Polish. It didn't go too badly, and the Foreign Minister who was there congratulated me on my effort, but added "you speak Polish with a very Czech accent" which I'm afraid is a bit of an insult in Poland. A year later, someone asked me if my mother was not Polish – so I had made a successful leap North.

CM: I think I'm right in saying that Slovak is the nearest to Polish, but Czech is quite distinctly different.

JM: The accent tends to fall on the penultimate syllable in Polish, and one syllable earlier in Czech. Sounds a detail, but it means the music and lilt of the language is quite distinct. There are also a lot of Italian and Latin imports into Polish, whereas the equivalents are pure Slav words in Czech. Anyway, it was a challenge. And I was head of post. You are head of post in Germany as DGTIP but in your own area, but suddenly this was the real thing, and my first full ambassadorial appointment.

CM: Before you tell me about what you did as Ambassador, can I just ask you about the Embassy and the Residence? Were you still in the old palace?

JM: On Aleja Róż, yes, a hopeless place to be, completely unsuitable for a set of offices. A once graceful town house. But it had atmosphere. We had moved on from stoves in the corner of the room and coal brought in buckets. I wouldn't say that the quality of the work was diminished by the circumstances in which we worked. One can manage. My own office was quite poky, but that didn't matter.

CM: And you lived in the modern house that was built in the '60s?

JM: Yes, known to Poles with a comical twist as 'Tutankhamen's tomb' because of its square shape and the overwhelming amount of black marble.

CM: Isn't it the design for a residence that was built three times, so it's the same as the Residence you lived in later on in Mexico?

JM: Yes, the same man, the naval architect. In fact, it was not too bad as a Residence. It had a very big entertainment area; you could squeeze in five hundred people and close off the adjacent dining area. The dining room was slightly awkward but it was more or less fit for purpose. Main problem for us was that it was so inconvenient to live in. I think the architectural plans had been approved by a bachelor ambassador; we had three children in residence and we were living on the whole of the top floor. But you have to have some room for guests as well, and there were quite a lot of guests at that time. So much shifting around. It may not have been an ideal residence, but brilliantly located at the bottom of the Prime Minister's garden and quickly accessible from the centre of the city. It had a lovely lawn all round it and a swimming pool, so it did not take away from our performance in Poland, to put it mildly.

CM: What were your priorities when you went to Poland as Ambassador in 1998? What was at the top of the agenda?

JM: Top of the agenda was: Is Poland going to be in the next round of enlargement of the EU. It was on the way with NATO already. The Poles had their own relationship with the Americans and also with us. We already had joint exercises with the Polish forces. So NATO was a done deal and was formally concluded when we were there in 2000. The next day after joining, we spent a memorable evening with Janusz Onyszkiewicz, who was Defence Minister then, and whom we had known as a dissident before. We had a jolly time, and he ceremoniously handed me a cigar which had been presented by Fidel Castro to one of

his Communist predecessors, and lovingly been kept in a special box in the fridge. A special gesture, but one which gave me laryngitis for a month.

EU accession was the big question. There were real doubts among the Member States whether Poland would be in the next wave. The French certainly were worried about Polish agriculture leaching the whole agriculture budget, from which they benefited of course. But generally there were more doubts about Poland than any other of the candidates. So where the British came down was of primordial importance to Poland.

CM: The British government were whole-heartedly in favour of Polish entry, as our policy had tended to be wider not deeper?

JM: Well, our policy tended indeed to be wider not deeper. There were policy arguments in Whitehall along precisely the lines that were going on in France as well, but coming out rather more positive. We certainly weren't saying that we doubted that they would be ready; rather that it was a long and complicated path and there were many things to be done. But in October 2000 Tony Blair came to Poland. We'd be trying to get this to happen from day one of my arrival, because this was a big and historic relationship and we felt not enough had been done at the top level. Agreed in principle two years before, there were obligations which got in the way. But finally it did happen, in my last month. The most important thing about that visit was the discussion during the night, when he was in Warsaw, about what was going to be said in the Prime Minister's speech about Polish membership of the EU. Eventually, that discussion in the small hours came up with quite a forward sentence.

CM: Whom was he addressing?

JM: Oh, a packed house of influential Poles, business and politics, including the Foreign Minister. It was a big event in the new Warsaw Stock Exchange. Everyone was waiting to see what would be said on that point.

CM: And you were still discussing it the night before?

JM: We were still discussing it the night before. He wasn't in the Residence; they were in a hotel because the delegation was too big to fit into our Residence. It was at the Intercontinental, and the discussion did go on a long time, but what came out, I thought, was the best we could possibly have achieved.

CM: I'm going to press this for the detail, John, because I think this is so interesting. This is something that only you and Tony Blair are going to be able to tell us. The evening before he gave the speech, it was not certain exactly how he was going to talk about Polish accession.

JM: Correct.

CM: Presumably, you'd had some kind of official dinner. Did you go back to the hotel afterwards and the draft was in your hands and you were discussing it?

JM: We'd had a dinner. We went back to the hotel. On this key point, we had a blank sheet of paper. A fine balance had to be struck. The PM was going to be careful about not getting way out in front from all the other members who included a variety of pro and not exactly anti, but at least sceptics. Eventually the phrase that came out of it was that he 'could not imagine that we could go into the next European election' - so nice EU terminology, not just British interests - 'without Poland being a member.' And that election was in summer 2004, 3 plus years away. I was sitting between the Foreign Minister, Geremek at the time – wonderful man, dissident of the old period - and on their other side their chief negotiator Saryusz-Wolski. I was cornered. I thought, my goodness! Will I live? They had been saying publicly that Poland should be joining within a year.

CM: Was it a good frisson that you felt?

JM: It was wonderful. Yes, they were so relieved. Nobody had set any deadline before: it was done by Blair in Warsaw. It was not immediate, but it was a clear deadline

CM: When you were discussing it the night before, were you inclined to be cautious about what he was going to say?

JM: No, I was not inclined to be cautious. At least I argued for the next accession to include Poland, whatever. Even if that meant waiting a bit. An accession without Poland would be a disaster – long term alienation of the largest by far of the potential new members.

CM: You were encouraging him to give some kind of date that would satisfy, or at least encourage, the Poles?

JM: The timing formula was finalised after I had left the room. But what came out met my point.

CM: I think this is really interesting, because you are saying that what turned out to be a very important phrase was just created the night before, after a state dinner, with you and presumably Jonathan Powell and the Private Secretary.

JM: Yes, there were various characters coming in and out of the room, but the main advisers and drafters were Jonathan Powell and Alastair Campbell. Those words set the bar - that was the first time anyone had set a precise date: The timing was right. All the other member states came on board quite quickly. It was distant enough for the existing membership not to be falling off their chairs in surprise, but it was close enough for the Poles to feel that they were home and dry, the details still to be filled in. But they had a deadline. It was a great moment. That was really the major achievement by the British government, and the Prime Minister personally, during my time in Poland.

CM: In terms of the people you met in Poland, who was in charge at that time – this was before the twins.

JM: The nice guys were in charge: Buzek as Prime Minister was a very approachable, middle-of-the-road man. I had reasonable access and I could see the Foreign Minister, Geremek, any time I wanted. Usually, it was at his command, asking ‘When’s the Prime Minister going to come?’ We knew a lot of the senior people. The opposition was more left-wing, to call them ex-Communist would be overdoing it, they were loosely defined a Socialist Party, and Miller was the leader of that party. His party won the next election, and he became Prime Minister after Buzek. Before the Tony Blair visit, we had to tell the Poles, and it was not a very welcome message, that it was normal for the Prime Minister on an official visit overseas, to meet the leader of the opposition. They didn’t very much like that, but they swallowed it in the end, and it did happen. From the point of view of British interests we did the right thing. Miller regarded the Prime Minister as having made a special gesture towards him; he must have been aware that nobody was keen on it on the government side.

Another touching thing happened during the visit. The team from No. 10 who speak on behalf of the Prime Minister, of course, on all matters to do with the stage management, but nevertheless one distrusts their judgement on some points, said, ‘For God’s sake, whatever you do, we don’t want soldiers.’ I said, ‘But, you know, in Poland, the Polish soldiers who fought with the Allies in the War is a very deep, emotional subject. I think some gesture towards this would be important.’ Eventually, we dragged them, kicking and screaming, to

an arrangement whereby there would be a line of Anders' Army Polish soldiers, very ancient now, at the War Memorial. He was going to lay a wreath at the Memorial and say hello. When I was travelling back to the airport with him at the end, he said, 'The most moving moment was meeting those soldiers.' That was a good thing to have achieved; they were a bridge back to a previous existence before Communism hit them between the eyeballs. For all sorts of reasons, the right thing to have done and it was done beautifully and he was very touched.

For the rest, no need to dwell greatly on the detail, but we were pushing for British business opportunities in Poland. Balcerowicz was Minister of the Economy while I was there, but he had been the Minister of Finance at the beginning. There was a thread of continuity through the post-1989 Polish governments which was this remarkable man who was so determined to modernise the Polish economy as quickly as he could. He went for exactly the opposite of the way that the Germans had approached the new *laender*. He said that the main thing was to encourage people to set up little businesses. 'Let's not worry about motorways. They cost a lot of money and we haven't got money. Just get on with business creation.' I think they had created – I can't remember the exact figure, but it was something like a thousand new small and medium-sized companies within a year and this grew and grew. There was a wonderful moment when Polish micro businesses near the German frontier were making garden gnomes, which of course are much loved by Germans. They were making them much more cheaply than in Germany, and the German union of garden gnome makers said this was unfair practice: we will not allow access to these Polish gnomes. But although Poland had not joined the EU, they had already been guaranteed wide ranging access to the German market. The argument about the gnomes was lost by the Germans. But this was symbolic of the light-footed way in which the Poles were creating a new economy. Of course, the benefits didn't go to every part of Poland; there were plenty of Poles, particularly in the North East, who thought they did not see any benefits. But the country was precipitately thrown into a different world, and I think the Polish economy has done pretty well as a result; through the currency crisis of 2008 for instance. They don't thank Balcerowicz very much because politically he is out of favour, but nevertheless, an open, liberal, active economy was created and he was largely the author of it; it was an honour to have known him.

I was obviously trying to push the chances of various British companies to invest in Poland and particularly in the service sector we were reasonably present: Price Waterhouse Cooper,

Brick Court Chambers, and so on. We didn't get into banking: by the time we were actively pursuing, the most promising banks had been gobbled up by others.

Director, Wider Europe, FCO, 2000–02

CM: You only spent two years in Poland. You came home in 2000, as you've just said, after Tony Blair's big visit in October and took up the job of Director Wider Europe, which means non-European Union Europe. Why was your time in Poland rather short? Normally you would have been there for three or four years.

JM: Because John Kerr wanted Judith back in a proper job, as he put it. This was fair: Judith hadn't worked when I was in Düsseldorf; nor in Poland, so in the files of the personnel department these were blank years for her. She needed to be back in harness.

CM: The job of Wider Europe, how did you find that?

JM: It fell into two halves. There were the candidate countries which were going to accede in 2004 and so there was a certain amount of 'How are your preparations going for the EU?' Visiting, motivating, encouraging. The second group was the outer pale of countries which counted as Wider Europe because of the way that membership of the OSCE (Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe) defined Europe, ie that the whole of the former Soviet Union was included. Russia was by far the biggest chicken in my hutch. But the ex-Soviet countries were very interesting, and little visited by senior Brits. I went to all the Stans, and Georgia. It was an older kind of diplomacy. No British minister ventured into this region, so I saw very senior people. I had a conversation with the Uzbek Foreign Minister as the Director Wider Europe, which was useful from a political point of view. We were pushing for some commercial opportunities; they were mainly in Kazakhstan (where I met the influential daughter of the President), in gas and oil. The Northern Caspian Sea has quite a lot of gas, in which the Russians were also competing, so an example of traditional, getting your foot in the door, commercial diplomacy. The political relationship was a bit thin and, I think, a bit uncomprehending, as far as the UK was concerned. One of our concerns was drugs coming out of Afghanistan into Kirghizstan and getting from there through Turkey into the European market. We made sure that drugs issue was always on the agenda in Central Asia. Accompanied by the Ambassador, I solemnly visited a lock-up in Kirghizstan in which there was a pile of drugs from floor to ceiling. So my visit obliged them, at least, to make sure that the place was full of something that looked like drugs. Whether it was in fact being

marketed by corrupt officials the next day ... well, a question mark. But it's important to ensure that your point is made. I wouldn't have missed visiting those countries for anything. They are a different world.

I visited Georgia. The big issue then was the Russian accusation that Chechen 'terrorists' were coming into Georgia to be rearmed, and returned to the Chechen civil war. Specifically to a traditional Chechen enclave, the Pankisi Valley. I flew up to the border of Georgia with Chechnya in a helicopter with an OSCE group who were watching over this. The OSCE had been careful always to have Russians in their observer group. They of course had their own communications to Moscow and that was the deal - blind eye to the telescope. That was what was intended to happen, so that we couldn't get too wildly out of synch. However, it didn't really look as if the Russian story added up. The Pankisi Valley was not right by Chechnya; there's a double range of mountains in between so there is a lot of climbing and walking to do before you get there. It was just a minor point of interest, but there cannot have been significant equipping of Chechens with heavy weaponry going on. That was fairly clear from the air. We landed quite close and the OSCE people did go – on skis, rather exciting and romantic – to make one of their regular visits to the Pankisi Valley. Georgia was interesting, and finding its feet. Not of major political interest in the UK at that stage. There was concern about the Chechen situation, but this was as nothing compared to what has happened subsequently, with the Russians taking over Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia and coming right into Georgia, which happened later on, as a result of a painful misreading of how much the West was willing to do to help them.

The more important part of the job was contact with the candidate countries, which was Poland again, but there were 13 others. I went to the smallest, Malta, for instance. The Maltese would have done anything to make sure that they were in the 2004 enlargement; they were being very helpful in making changes in their government structures and judicial system and so on. I expect it was rather more rough and ready in the end, but they very much looked to Britain and to Italy to be their helpers. That was pretty active. I got to Romania, Hungary. As to Slovakia, once Dzurinda had become Prime Minister they were pukka in European and our political definitions, and made an impressive catch-up effort to make sure they were ready to join, which they did with the 2004 accession. It would have been a very clumsy arrangement to have the Slovakia not in the EU, when its immediate neighbours Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic were. This was a subject that bounced between the

EU Departments and Wider Europe. The former led on European policy, but it fell to me to go to the candidate countries, a sensible division of effort.

CM: On these countries, something that has been much debated since is the decision of the British government to allow East Europeans to come to work in the UK when most other EU countries took the opportunity of delaying full access for four or five years. It is now said that the government very much underestimated the enthusiasm of the Poles and others to come to work in the West. Were you involved in those discussions? Was this something that appeared on the radar then?

JM: No, it wasn't something in which I was involved. I went to Vienna in 2003; they didn't join until 2004. I suspect that was still an issue being discussed in the UK in late 2003.

CM: And the Poles and the Czechs, were they enthusiastic about having access for their nationals to work and live in Western European countries, or was it not something they were particularly pressing for?

JM: Well, they were certainly pressing for it in principle, because the free movement of people is one of the three pillars of the European Union. They did not want to be second class members, as they saw it, of the European Union. I don't know how they portrayed it in the second half of 2004, when they had joined, whether they were saying they were second class members because they hadn't got full access, or whether they weren't bothering about the issue. The accession countries varied very greatly. There was little emigration from the Czech Republic, for instance. On the whole the pattern was immigration into the Czech Republic, which suddenly became the must-be-there place for any number of Americans and Germans, setting up small companies, particularly in IT. The Poles, well, when I was in Poland, it was not something that was worrying them, because they were much more focussed on the problems of agriculture and how they were going to deal with that. They were, even at that time, more concerned about their relations with the east. They wanted to encourage their neighbours to be a cordon sanitaire between them and Moscow. I never went to Belarus. The Lukashenko government was off limits for senior visitors. The President was completely unreconstructed and he still is. Fortunately, he now irritates the Russians more than he irritates us, so that's his fate and the Russians' fate. It was very interesting to go to Moscow, of course, fifteen years after being in Soviet Department, because things had changed so fast.

Ambassador to Austria, 2003–07

CM: You were Director of Wider Europe for two years. Judith was this time working full-time in London; the children were older, so she wasn't even having to rush and rescue them from their nursery schools. In 2003 you applied for the job of Ambassador to Austria. It's hard to think of anyone better qualified: you spoke German; you knew the area all around extraordinarily well, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland.

JM: Yes it was my fate to be Central European, *mitteleuropäisch*.

CM: You went off to Austria; you were there for four years, the usual term, and for the last two years you also doubled up as the Permanent Representative for the UK to the UN in Vienna and to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency), so you were covering quite a lot of stuff there.

JM: That really made the job interesting, actually. It was lovely to be in Austria. There was quite a good relationship between Tony Blair in his last period of government and Schüssel, the then Chancellor of Austria. That's always helpful, of course, and indeed, I came over with Schüssel's delegation for a morning of talks in No. 10 with Tony Blair. The top level was covered and good. There was always detail which had to be got right. British troop movements to the Middle East, tend to fly over Austria, for which you need permission on each occasion. And transporting weapons by road is more complicated again, but my Defence Section had that all working smoothly. Austria is also used by some British troops for R and R, and also for winter training. So there is quite close relationship with the Austrian forces. We were trying to sell a fighter to Austria for modernizing their air force and eventually they opted for Eurofighter. That's the sort of issue that takes up quite a lot of one's time in the end and we did a lot of lobbying for our solution which was cheaper. For wider political reasons, the Austrians wanted to be seen as serious players on the European field and therefore Eurofighter was a good name and that's what they opted for. A classic business for embassies to be involved in.

Otherwise, it was whether we could make common cause with the Austrians on any awkward EU issue for us. The main one was the Working Time Directive. Fortunately, we did have common interests on this, because they also could see that the implications: people working, who slept on the job, were very expensive. Junior doctors on duty too of course, and there is a large and high quality health service in Austria, so it was an issue for them. Ditto people

like firemen, emergency services. We managed to stick with them for quite a time. We were not alone, but having Austria on board meant that we had a qualified majority to block what we considered to be the worst angles of the Working Time Directive.

Otherwise, an important moment came up in my time: 2005, the fiftieth anniversary of the withdrawal of the Allied and Russian troops from Austria. It was an historic moment because it was the only time before 1989 when the Russians withdrew any of the territory occupied by them in WWII.

CM: And no one quite knows why they did it.

JM: Well, of course, in the late 40s the Russians had proposed that all the occupying forces withdraw from Germany, in return for the whole of Germany becoming neutral. Adenauer had turned it down with contumely. But the Russians hadn't completely given up on it. They certainly regarded Austria as a test case – and it was the same formula - all the troops were withdrawn on both sides and the Austrians wrote a commitment to permanent neutrality into their constitution. In other words, a mini-version of what they wanted to achieve and never did achieve in Germany. But for Austria emerging from occupation, it was a massive relief.

So it was something worth celebrating and we celebrated it in style at Schönbrunn Palace, Maria Theresa's palace, then out-of-town, very much in town now. It was also the HQ of British forces in Vienna. So deeply symbolic. In the wonderful forecourt of the Palace, we planned a Beating Retreat by British and Austrian marching bands. Each put forward their best band. Unfortunately, that evening it poured with rain, absolutely poured. In advance, both bands had said, 'If it rains, we can't do it. Sorry. Too damaging to our instruments.' Well, who was going to blink first once it was clear that the rain was not going to stop? Neither side blinked, and it went ahead. They got completely soaked, but they did it magnificently. In the evening, the searchlights through the rain made it magically memorable, romantic. The Duke of Kent was there to take the salute, with most of the Austrian Cabinet. Something of real significance that was being celebrated, but it was a lot of fun. There was no further mention of damage done to instruments!

CM: John, I just want to go back one step. You were talking about the lobbying you were able to do about the Working Time Directive. I was wondering about the difference between being Ambassador in a European country outside the EU, like Poland, and in a European

country within the EU, like Austria, where presumably a good deal of your relationship is dealt with in Brussels. Have you any comment on this?

JM: Well, Poland did not join the EU until 2004, so before that we would not have bothered to discuss an issue under negotiation unless it was very slow burning or long term. We were talking to them about agriculture, as we had been during my time there, because of the implications for the whole EU budget. With Austria, a member for nearly ten years by the time I arrived, as I said earlier, our bilateral discussions were limited to any big item on the EU agenda. And the main one where Austria's vote would count, was Working Time.

UK Perm. Rep. to UN in Vienna and UK Gov. to IAEA, 2006–07

CM: What change came about when you took over as Perm Rep to the UN and the IAEA? First of all, what was the thinking behind joining all those posts together?

JM: Well, the active bit was the IAEA. We did have good, solid relations with the drugs and international crime UN organisation in Vienna, but that was a professional relationship with people who were dealing with crime and drugs in London, in which I was only periodically involved. The IAEA was quite different, because that was the beginning of the whole deal with Iran. In the Residence we had what turned out to be a very successful meeting of the permanent members of the Security Council at ministerial level, the Germans and the EU Foreign Relations Commissioner. That was in order to come up with a line which would be offered to the Iranians. Oddly enough, agreement was reached round the table, but the proposal was turned down by the Iranians. Actually it was very similar to what was eventually agreed. Time is often a useful tool in negotiations of this kind. Obviously, the detail was not being negotiated in Vienna after that meeting. But the IAEA was very much involved, because part of the deal was IAEA inspectorial access to Iranian sites. We couldn't, as it were, speak for them without consulting them, so there was a lot of consulting going on. And Vienna is traditionally regarded by the Iranians as neutral territory. So there was a lot of toing and froing. And it made for a very exciting dossier. I thought that, given that the bi-lateral relationship did not take up a great deal of one's time, it made a sensible combined job, and my successor took that over. And of course, everyone did sign up for the Iranian agreement.

CM: Did you meet the Iranian negotiators?

JM: Yes, the person I was in weekly contact with was my Iranian opposite number, the Iranian Ambassador, but he was a senior member the Iranian nuclear establishment, obviously deliberately chosen. No Iranian is easy to deal with; he was obviously not empowered to create wiggle-room, which after all is what you always need in a negotiation. But you could get into arguments with him in which he was reasonably straightforward. Anyway, it made for a very good job for my last period there and I felt that the deal done with the Obama administration was a good deal, and after all, Obama got authority from the Hill for that.

CM: We've come to 2007 when you retired. You were the first generation to work beyond sixty, so you retired from the Foreign Office at the age of sixty one. But I don't want to pack up here, because I want to talk about your subsequent career. I should note that for the next two years you worked as the Dean of the University of Kent in Brussels, so you were coming and going from the UK to Brussels during this period. You left that job in 2009 and you accompanied Judith to Mexico and then to South Africa, so we are talking about an eight-year period when you were a diplomatic spouse. I don't want to let you go without your saying something about this. Your and Judith's careers are very interesting ones. It is an extraordinary achievement to manage to run your careers throughout your marriage right up to the end, both of you having three ambassadorial posts.

JM: Yes - it was a first.

CM: Let's take Mexico first. Were you there all the time? Did you have other interests that you were pursuing? How did you play being a diplomatic spouse?

JM: Well, I was quite useful to Judith in Mexico, because I speak Spanish. One of the myths about Mexico is that everyone must speak English because they're right next to the United States. They don't. I was a useful extra pair of hands. When we were touring far-flung states, and we tended to visit together, I often found myself paired up with the Governor's wife, and these were sometimes quite powerful figures in their own right. And of course I was able to help in the heavy programme of Residence entertaining, and the constant stream of guests who stayed with us, often 'wondering' if they might stay over for the weekend to see something of historic Mexico. So walking Baedeker was an additional string to my bow. At the same time, we were travelling to and fro across the Atlantic for me to keep up my annual classes at the Vienna Diplomatic Academy, and my visiting professorship at Canterbury, and in Mexico I was an occasional lecturer at the leading private economic and

political University (ITAM) in Mexico City, founded by the Chairman of the mining company Board on which Judith now sits, and of which the then Foreign Minister was an alumnus. So it all added up to a deeply satisfying and varied mixture.

When the Foreign Minister very nicely gave a little reception for Judith at the end of her posting, he said, ‘The great advantage of the United Kingdom over everybody else is that they had two ambassadors here.’ A bit overstated, but it was a double act, in which, because it is the Latin tradition, I was always also the Excellence. The Spanish and the Americans have a very special place in Mexico, but we were up there with them and all this helped.

CM: How did things change when you went to South Africa? Were you essentially playing the same role, supporting Judith and travelling with her?

JM: It was slightly different. South Africa is much less given to Excellences and other overstatements, but it was certainly useful to Judith to have me around. Visits to other parts of the country tended to be shorter, so I accompanied less. We nevertheless had some unforgettable moments – like flying over the Great Karoo desert to visit the Square Kilometre Array, a huge electronic telescope project. And driving great distances absorbing the wonderful natural features of this vast, diverse country. Neither of us is a great wild animal lover, but we did enough to get a grasp of the huge Nature Park business in SA, and the ever present poaching problem. We were active entertainers in our two houses. I was able to get to know a range of the fascinating and admirable people whom Judith could invite, but relations with the ANC (African National Congress) were complicated and it was largely with other parts of South African society that we were in close contact. The two Residences, one in the north and one in the south, were slightly more problematic and so I was able to help steady the ship. I did know the Foreign Minister but she never spoke of the advantage of Britain having two high commissioners! However, I wouldn’t have been without that African experience for anything. I think it was fascinating, broadening. South African politics is absorbingly complicated. One needs to read, and digest, some of the pretty awful things we were responsible for in the distant, and not so distant past, to put it in context.

Afterthought

Ma fin est mon commencement, et mon commencement est ma fin (Guillaume de Machaut 1300-1377). (A reverse canon by the greatest French composer of the 14th century.)

You asked me to write a few words about the thread of music through my diplomatic life.

My ‘minder’ in the Personnel Department during my first year asked what I would do to occupy myself if I found myself in a posting with very little to do. I replied, tongue in cheek, that I would practise and try to memorize one of the Bach Solo Cello suites. Well, it never worked out like that. But I nearly always managed to find a cranny somewhere to keep one aspect or another of my music going.

In India, I learned sitar, my fellow student being an Indian girl. You don’t read Indian music, you memorize it. Listen to your guru, and repeat. And repeat again. Her memory was about triple the length of mine. I got better, but could never touch her performance. It taught me how important memory is in Eastern culture.

In Prague we had a high ceilinged atrium in our house and a residence grand piano, next to which I installed my grand piano. I played 2-piano piano duets with a range of pianists, Czech and British – wonderful resonance, and a lot of fun. And I played cello in a quintet of political misfits who were amusing companions, but serious about their music. The leader, an architect responsible for the reconstruction of Prague’s Troja Palace (somehow in architecture you could almost escape the dead hand of the Party), was damned if he was going to allow Party hacks to be the first to play a note of music in his wonderful reconstituted and decorated main hall. So he arranged what he described to the authorities as a necessary ‘Acoustic Proba’ to ensure things would be in order for the Party’s brass band – the Proba was our quintet. It attracted a full house of supposed acoustic experts. And so it came about that a bunch of dissidents played the first notes in that distinguished hall.

In Paris Ambassador Ewen Fergusson was a great music lover. Early on, he had found some hole in the end of year budget to buy a Steinway concert grand for the capacious ballroom (important to have space to cater for a monster like that). We had many memorable concerts, mini opera, solo singers, pianists, choirs, the Xmas Panto. Most remarkable, though well short of a great performance, was an 8-hands, one piano, rendition of a Dvorak Slavonic Dance by Diana Princess of Wales, her sister, No 2 in the Embassy Rob Young, and myself, accompanied by gales of laughter.

In Germany we had many musical opportunities, and willing audiences. As Nigel Broomfield told me when we arrived, music wins hearts here. We squeezed the lemon pretty dry. Starting with an arrangement I wrote of Elgar’s Chanson de Matin for a quintet of

friends played in a marquee in the garden of our lovely Rhineside residence. A supporting programme in which we each played something was followed by a pretty wild Ceilidh with an excellent band and caller from Northumberland. Much in between, but our swan song was a farewell for the Minister President of our *Land*, Johannes Rau, shortly before he was elected President of Germany. I accompanied Rachel Isserlis, the talented violinist sister of Stephen, in Beethoven's Spring Sonata, as an hors d'oeuvre to a farewell dinner for the Raus and ourselves. Alas, that gracious villa is no longer part of the diplomatic estate.

In Poland we had a huge upstairs entertaining area, ungainly, but you could certainly get numbers in. And we again had two pianos, and a range of singers and pianists to call upon. But what sticks in the memory is our Christmas party with carols. The Poles love a party, and everyone from the bottle washer upwards turned up, in their glad rags. Standing room only. We sang a mix of Polish and British carols. The Poles raised the roof with theirs, and they knew all the verses; the Brits did their best, but I'm afraid that even with me banging away fortissimo on the piano, it was a clear 2:0 victory to Poland. It is perhaps worth adding, and the same applied in Prague, that carols were for the older generation, a way of touching base with, and celebrating, their pre-communist histories. And both countries have a rich variety of native carols.

My final posting, Austria, when it comes to music, has an unco' guid impression o' itself. But that does create opportunities. The Residence is one of the best in the Diplomatic estate, with a substantial ballroom on the first floor. For the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, we played to a packed hall one of the composer's favourite works, his quintet for piano and wind instruments, the wind group brought together by an able horn player, Richard Bassett, then Times correspondent in Central Europe. In an even more distinguished venue in Vienna, my Romanian colleague and I established an annual charity concert in the Musikverein, each piece played by a musical diplomat and student talent from the music academies. The series is still running in 17 years on.

Music helped me to enjoy a rounded career, a theme with many variations. Playing with others, across linguistic and political boundaries, added a dimension of pleasure and togetherness which helped the 34 years to fly by.