

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

**ABBOTT-WATT, Thorhilda Mary Vivian (Thorda) (born 11 February 1955)
OBE 2017**

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BRITISH DIPLOMATIC ORAL HISTORY PROGRAMME

RECOLLECTIONS OF THORDA ABBOTT-WATT, RECORDED AND TRANSCRIBED BY SHEILA LYALL GRANT

Today is Tuesday 22nd of March 2022 and this is Sheila Lyall Grant recording Thorda Abbott-Watt.

SLG: Thorda what was it that attracted you to the FCO, why did you join?

TAW: I have quite often asked myself that question, not in the sense that I can't think why I ever did this ridiculous job, but because I don't think it's always straightforward to know one's motives well. There was certainly a sense of adventure, but I liked the security of knowing that I would always have a job, while at the same time being able to travel. What first set me off was my parents working in Pakistan for the Foreign Office in the 1970s and we used to drive up to Afghanistan in the summer for a break because Kabul was much cooler than Rawalpindi or Islamabad, and I remember thinking that Afghanistan was beautiful. It was the hippie era then and there were a lot of young people, people only a couple of years older than I was, sitting slumped against walls and spaced out of their minds, and I thought I would really love to come back to this part of the world, but not like that.

SLG: So, your father was working in the British Embassy?

TAW: Yes, he had been a soldier, first with the Indian Army, then the British Army, when I turned up. I was an accident - they were very sweet about it and never said I was a mistake! He joined the Foreign Office at a junior rank after retirement to put me through school.

SLG: You were visiting in the school holidays?

TAW: Yes, it gave me a taste for travelling to places that were different, completely different, from the sort of places most of my friends went to.

SLG: Did you join straight from school?

TAW: Yes, I did in 1974 and I went straight into Protocol Department and spent a lot of time putting guest lists in order and finding out what decorations people had and chasing up guests for invitations for Buckingham Palace. This was very difficult at the time because the IRA were planting bombs around London and a lot of people who were of the seniority that would be included in the Buckingham Palace guest list were very nervous about giving out personal details, and their PAs were also very nervous about doing that. But the problem was that we weren't allowed to tell people they were being considered for a Buckingham Palace guest list, so you had to ring up and say you were from the Foreign Office and talk your way round it. One of my colleagues eventually said to somebody that they were on a Buckingham Palace list, and it turned out that he wasn't on it because he'd been put on a previous guest list three months earlier; and of course he then rang the Palace and asked where his invitation was. So, you had all those sorts of sensitivities to deal with. I was 19 years old when I joined, so I was very young by the standards of the office at the time.

SLG: Were you included in any of these Protocol events?

TAW: Yes, I managed several State Visits and as a result I got to go to lovely things like Guildhall suppers and a lot of National Day receptions. It was very useful because one had a probationer's salary in those days, which was significantly less, it was about 10 or 15% less than the full salary. You were only paid the full professional salary after the first two years, so actually I became known as somebody who would always go to a reception if somebody else didn't want to go for the free food!

I did that job as my first introduction for 18 months, roughly, and then went to what was then Rhodesia Department, which tells you how long ago it was. Rhodesia was a very important topic at the time, and it was one of our foreign policy priorities. I remember David Owen coming into our office one day. I ended up replying to letters from members of the public, which was bizarre, and it's where I realised that a lot of people actually care deeply about a particular issue, but an awful lot of people who are completely bonkers write in as well. We had one letter on a giant piece of paper in red felt pen saying "Keep your hands off beautiful Rhodesia" signed "God", and some wag had written at the top "No address, no reply".

Those first three years were very much a learning curve, all about learning how the Foreign Office worked. We couldn't visit Rhodesia because of sanctions, but anyway we didn't do

familiarisation visits in those days as air fares were much higher than they are today, and it just wasn't something for which there was a budget.

SLG: You would have been very junior then?

TAW: Yes, I was a DS9 and part of a larger team, and it was quite a big team. I remember that William Patey and I between us took over from Matthew Parris as they expanded the job. I learnt about things like working as part of a team. I remember that I had done a lot of background reading and I can remember recommending a book to somebody in the department, which he promptly read and then got credit on his annual appraisal for having read. I think that was the beginning of realising that self-deprecation is all very well, but there are times when you must sell yourself.

Latin America Floater, 1979-80

SLG: It sounds like you learned that quite early! Then you went on your first posting in 1979?

TAW: Yes – being a Latin American floater was the best job in the world. Somebody pays you to go round a continent with two suitcases.

SLG: And you did that for one year?

TAW: It was a bit longer than that, I think it was about 18 months. I started off in South America, which is where I really wanted to go, but I also did one tour in North Yemen because they had run out of Middle East floaters. Then I came back to Buenos Aires and then I was asked if I would mind extending and going to Bangkok for eight months as Vice Consul, so of course I loved the chance of doing that and it was enormous fun. Bangkok was a revelation because it was the first consular job that I had had where you had a massive number of British people getting into one sort of difficulty or another, and of course it's a very long way away from home. The main problem was always that if a tourist didn't have money, somebody in the UK had to put it up, and an airfare in those days was about £400. They didn't have cheap air fares to Hong Kong or Bangkok, and it was still very much the hippy era and there were a lot of drugs. There wasn't HIV at that stage, but you did get a lot of STDs and I had a succession of British blokes coming in looking extremely embarrassed and shuffling about so eventually I had some slips printed off with the telephone number of

the doctor who would give them penicillin or whatever they needed and just left them outside on the counter to save everybody grief.

SLG: You were the Vice Consul at that time?

TAW: Yes, the Consul was on leave, but the person who was the Vice Consul did his job. I was very lucky - his name was Norman who was a very nice chap, but he had done as much travelling in Thailand as he wanted, so every time there was a new British prisoner, I would volunteer to visit them. There were a lot of prisoners then, mostly on drug charges and we had a statutory obligation to visit them within 24 hours of hearing of their arrest. I would go off to different parts of the country on the Thai train system, which was excellent, and then of course spend an extra night and look around a bit.

SLG: Did you speak the language?

TAW: No, I can say hello and thank you. Thai is extraordinarily complicated to learn. I had done some language training, but the language training I did was Spanish for South America. The Thais were generally very good about letting us know who had been put into which prison, but it didn't always work as they got the European nationalities confused. There was a network of consular officers and every so often I would come back and say to my German colleague "I went to see a Brit, but he turned out to be German and here are his details", and they would do the same for me. The authorities thought one European looked very much like another and unfortunately had the British embassy telephone numbers so would often call us up and tell us they had a Brit when it wasn't.

SLG: How did you find out then that they were in fact German?

TAW: I would go all the way out to visit them, and in many cases they clearly weren't British.

We did have some people who died. I was on duty call one day when a gentleman hanged himself, which was obviously very upsetting because he'd been to see me the day before and I had had to tell him that I couldn't provide consular services and I couldn't get him home to the UK unless somebody could put up the money, and unbeknownst to me that was just the last straw for him. That is one case that haunts me. It was often difficult to communicate with people's family, and they were not always willing to transfer funds.

British Vice Consul, Paris, 1981-84

SLG: Then you went on to be Vice Consul in Paris in 1981.

TAW: That was largely visa work, which nobody wanted to do, but the good thing about it was that it was a nine to five job, particularly in the summer months; every day you worked your way through the passports of the applicants and then you stopped. We had a lot of Iranian applicants who were coming out of Iran at that time, and of course by the time they'd got to France they were in a safe third country, but quite often they wanted to come to the UK and of course they didn't qualify, so one spent an awful lot of time disappointing people, which is always very difficult.

At the weekends, and this seems extraordinary now, but at the weekends we were required to do a roster of consular cover, particularly in summer months. You were on duty after normal working hours from Friday evening and you quite often wouldn't get more than four or five hours' sleep before Monday morning, and you were doing that alone. A security guard in the embassy would ring you on your landline to let you know people had turned up. We eventually got a sort of crude form of mobile towards the end of my time, but of course what would happen is people would still come into the embassy. There was a thing called the Magic Bus which did fares to Paris for £15, which even in the early 90's was cheap, and this brought a lot of people who then ran out of funds.

SLG: Who was the ambassador when you were in Paris?

TAW: It started off with Reginald Hibbert and then John Fretwell. John Fretwell was delightful. Reginald Hibbert was famous for the fact that when he came down to the Consulate to say his farewells he had to be told where the staff entrance was, so I think you can take that as an indication that we didn't see him very often. John Fretwell did come down to the Consular building from time to time and he also made a point of including consular staff when he did events, which was very nice. Consular work, we always used to say, was a bit like being the dustman - everybody thought that it was terribly important to have it done, but it wasn't of course anything they would ever do. There was a bit of a sense of them and us, which I never took any notice of at all.

I was not happy with my living accommodation in the Moroccan red-light district of Paris and basically said “Send me somewhere civilised to live or I’ll pack up and go home”, and I eventually managed to find a tiny little place to live in a miniature studio. The room had half a floor upstairs and a bed under the eaves.

It was a very happy posting for me and I am still in touch with people from that time. The Embassy was about equally divided among the 20 or 25 junior staff between those people who thought Paris was unspeakable and the accommodation not very nice and the rest. Some staff found the French rude and impossible, and life was more expensive than in the UK and you couldn't get anything British then. On the other hand, there were some of us who said we must be better off than students, so whatever Paris has got, we’ll get some. We spent a lot of time eating out in cheap restaurants on the South Bank, and found you could go to a lot of museums for free on Mondays.

I spent a ridiculously long time as a DS9, it was something like 12 years and it wasn't because I was a hopeless incompetent. I had had to take six months out when my mother died, and when I got back from floating I had some very good appraisals but I was told that it wasn't terribly impressive because you had to have done a job for a year before they could really consider you, so of course I'd lost by that stage two years - and then you had a thing called the seniority list. Once you qualified for promotion, which I did at the end of Paris, you still had to work your way up the list.

Third Secretary (Chancery), UKREP Brussels, 1984-86

SLG: Did you go on promotion from this job to the next one?

TAW: I was on the list by then, but I went to UKREP Brussels. I wanted to do a policy job. I had asked for political work, and I didn't have the nerve to say no when they offered it to me. Brussels had an appalling reputation for long hours and being very high-powered and merciless. The man for whom I worked made it quite clear that he felt that giving the job to somebody without a degree was not satisfactory, and that I had three months to make good or I would be going home.

I didn't go to university because my father was very unwell in my last year of school, we knew he was going to die, and I didn't want to go away. I knew that I wanted to join the

Foreign Office. There were three entry levels then and I got in to the executive stream. Even in those days there were only three others out of 20 who got in just with A levels.

During my time in Brussels, there was a time when we were negotiating for VAT rebates, and I got stuck in a lift with Margaret Thatcher, which was quite fun. Brussels sharpened me; it sharpened my antennae, it made me much better at taking notes and getting to the crux of things, so it was a good training role for me and, as some of the best first secretaries and counsellors we had in the office were in Brussels, it gave me a bar to aim for, if you like. I looked at it and I thought that if I'm going to get to be a first secretary, that's what I've got to be like. I little realised quite how high I was setting the bar, but UKREP was very good for me, and I also got to work with very interesting people. We were used to having ministers out to visit. At any one time there would be five or six ministers attending different meetings, and my job for the Foreign Affairs Council was to try and get people in for the right issues at the right time. Sometimes when you walked into the room the only person who wasn't a minister would be you. Geoffrey Howe came out a lot, he was very nice to work for. You could tell he was a lawyer - you could give him a brief on a subject that he had never encountered before, and he would read it and within half an hour he would go into the Council, and he'd speak as if he was the world expert on e.g., Spanish and Portuguese fish and fishing rights. On one occasion I remember he was talking to me about what the next items were likely to be, and he walked into the gentleman's lavatory, and I thought well, I can't really follow him, so I stood at the door, but he walked in and carried on talking and then looked round and said "Oh, just a minute". I thought that was very funny because once he got his mind focused on something that was what he was focused on. He was very impressive - if slow, perhaps, on his feet.

Maritime, Aviation and Environment Department, FCO , 1986–88

TAW: I left Brussels on promotion and joined Maritime, Aviation and Environment Department just as there was a very heated debate about environment issues. There was a lot of controversy about the use of steel-jawed leg traps to catch animals for fur and the protection of the Greenland white fronted goose, whose numbers were apparently declining. It was probably the most heavily pressured job I have ever done and it's the only job that I left knowing that I had left work unfinished. It just got bigger and bigger, and I didn't seem to be very successful in convincing people that we needed more resources if we were to attempt to do it well. It's the only job I've ever left where I've said "Look, I've left you the best notes I

can, I just don't want to know any more about this". Unfortunately, my successor only lasted about four months before he had a breakdown.

Second Secretary, British Embassy, Bonn, 1988-91

SLG: I assume the FCO paid you more now.

TAW: Slightly more, yes, and when my mother had died there was just enough money left to buy a small place of my own. I hadn't realised at the time just how clever I was to buy somewhere. After two years I went on another posting, in Bonn. It's the only place I'd ever asked not to serve. My parents had been there in the 60s and were miserable. I knew the accommodation would be dire, but I had the best job in the embassy as it turned out, as Second Secretary Chancery. I ran the Berlin budget, even though I had made such a dog's breakfast of the accounts in Rio de Janeiro that my boss in Rio had said I should never be put in charge of public funds again!

It was a fascinating time to be there. We didn't think the Berlin wall would fall that quickly. I can remember going up to the Brandenburg Gate and looking at it and saying wouldn't it have been splendid in the days when you could drive through the gate, and my boss saying yes, but not in our time, Thorda, and I didn't disagree with him. Then 18 months later the wall was down. The Ambassador, Christopher Mallaby, had a very hard job as we were all taken by surprise by the speed of the fall. It was a whole raft of things - the collapse of the former Soviet Union was astonishing when it happened, and the speed and the way in which things changed. I eventually got to walk under the Brandenburg gate thinking "This is cool!", but you couldn't stop it, it was unstoppable. The Germans wanted to unite, so was it a period of great pressure. The big question was, what would it cost? We had to then negotiate the removal of our armed forces, which clearly had cost implications for us because the Germans had been paying for their presence. The perceived wisdom was that it would take them 15 years to pay off the costs of unification. I think a lot of us realised that it was going to take a lot longer than that.

It was very interesting seeing the West Germans and the East Germans together. The West Germans weren't always very nice to the East Germans. They tended to regard them a sort of useless peasantry, and there were all these tales going round about how they tried to put them to work, and they didn't understand about work. For example: "Why haven't you finished

building a wall”, “Well, we ran out of bricks”, “So, why didn't you order some more?”, “We didn't know we could”, because of course in East Germany they always ran out of bricks. There were a lot of tales like that. I remember going into the supermarket and it had a lovely row of cheeses at a marvellous cheese counter, and whereas I would buy the real whole cheese and always try and get a slice off that rather than the plastic sort of cheese, or the pre sliced, the East Germans were absolutely riveted by the sliced cheese because it was something you didn't get in East Germany, and it was the sort of interesting reversal that things that we regarded as of great value like a whole cheese, they considered to be inferior to processed cheese. It was a very interesting time. I was very lucky to be there when Christopher Mallaby was the ambassador. I can remember he liked to go off fishing. One weekend I had to take him a telegram on a Sunday. He was always on duty, but I thought “Rats, there goes my Sunday afternoon, but never mind”. He said to me “Do you know what to do with a trout?” I said ‘Yes, cook it!’ and so he gave me a bag with two trout in, which well made up for my Sunday afternoon being slightly disrupted. That was the sort of person he was. It was things like that that made a difference, I think, in an embassy.

First Secretary, European Union (External), Presidency Unit, Western European Department, 1991-95

SLG: You left Germany in 1991 to work in Western European Department.

TAW: Well, I was half in EUD internal and half in EUD external. The job that I was doing basically disintegrated, so I went into Western European Department. I think it would be fair to say that I had a challenging time. The then head of department didn't particularly like women. She'd come from a working-class district in Scotland and had been the first person in her family to go to university and I think she rather assumed that I'd been born with a silver spoon in my mouth and had had it all too easy. I don't think it was just me. She laid into a lot of women, so it wasn't a particularly happy time. She also wove her own wool to make her clothes so apart from being shouted at, it was a bit like being assaulted by a blanket. Then Judith Macgregor became the deputy head and my world changed for the better. After Western European Department, I went to Personnel Operations and said I had done enough Europe and didn't want to go somewhere I could get to on a ferry - and so I started my Soviet progression.

First Secretary, Head of Commercial Section, British Embassy, Kiev, 1995-98

TAW: I was appointed head of commercial section in 1995. I did aid as well. About half way through the posting in Kiev, I acquired a new, very good, third secretary, so I syphoned off the Know How Fund and let her run that, which she did very efficiently. It was an interesting time to be in Kiev. I was the first of the second generation of people in our embassy there. The first generation had all been in Moscow before at some stage in their lives, so I was the first person to come who had never been to the former Soviet Union before. I was initially a bit disappointed, and I thought “I wish I had seen it when it was still the Soviet Union”, but I discovered that, even a few years on, there was still an awful lot of the old Soviet Union there. There were limited food supplies, and the embassy had a big lorry sent out from the UK every three months. You could get frozen stuff in the lorry, and they agreed to freeze fresh milk for me because you could only get UHT in Kiev. They sent things like light bulbs too as you couldn’t get the right sort of light bulbs for the British lamps that the embassy had provided us with.

There was still a three-queue system in the shops. The three-queue system is a very Soviet thing. You queue up in front of, say, the cheese counter, and you point to what you want, and they give you a piece of paper with the bill on; then you go and queue at the cash desk and they take your money, and they give you a receipt. You then take that receipt and go back to the cheese counter demonstrating that you've paid, and you pick up your produce. You could spend 15 minutes buying one article in the state shops. In fact, one didn't do that very often because the shops didn't often have anything you wanted. I would go and get things like batteries from the state department store for my alarm clock, but that was about all.

You had this very Soviet thing that sometimes the shops just simply randomly seemed to acquire supplies of things, which you quickly bought even if you didn't want them. I remember going in once and seeing a big pile of lemons so I thought “Oh good, I'll get the lemons, lots of people in the embassy will like lemons, so I'll get a bagful”. Once, they had for some reason ping pong balls and blue paint. I had to tell myself “No, you don't need ping pong balls, and nobody needs blue paint”! The fresh produce there was difficult to get, and everything grown was very large. I think this was a legacy of Stalin’s starvation of the Ukrainians because they couldn't see the point of harvesting something when it was small if it was going to grow bigger, because that meant more food. There was a very limited range. You wouldn't see something like an avocado. Bananas came in every so often, and were a rarity. I once or twice got a pineapple, but they were massively expensive. What was quite

amusing was that if you draw a cartoon in this country and you want to show somebody who's an incredibly rich, bloated capitalist you give them champagne and caviar in front of them, but if you wanted to do that in the Soviet Union you showed them eating pineapples because that was the most exotic and expensive thing they could think of.

It was interesting and very sad because the country was desperate for investment but a lot of the directors of companies didn't understand how the commercial world worked. We had somebody come in who manufactured kettles in the UK and thought that they could manufacture kettles in Ukraine because there was a limited choice there then. You could either get an imported Bosch that was massively expensive - we're talking about two months' salary for the average Ukrainian - or you could get a sort of Russian tin thing with a flower painted on it. He had worked out that if you manufactured them in Ukraine, you could produce an electric kettle at an affordable price. He asked the director how big he thought the market was for something like that in Ukraine, and the director didn't understand the question. That tells you what you need to know about how the Soviet economy worked. The market didn't come into it; basically, if you produced anything, somebody would buy it.

SLG: What about working with the Ukrainians?

TAW: The Ukrainians in the embassy were delightful. They were mostly women, largely because we recruited people who could speak English and it was generally the women who had done languages at university, whereas the men had done things like engineering or something useless like Marxist economics. The women were also - and this sounds like a gross generalisation, but it was demonstrated time and time again - the women would turn up on time, they were grateful for the job because they knew they would get paid every month and they worked as hard as they could, and they would do anything to impress you and to get you to keep them in employment. I had all women in my commercial section so when I had two candidates who were neck and neck for a new job, I thought, well let's get some testosterone here, and I hired the young man. He only lasted three or four months. He was very good with visitors, and he liked that, but he couldn't be bothered with the filing, and the more tedious work. He loved having a visiting card with "British Embassy" on it, but he took to disappearing off at 11:00 o'clock in the morning and going round to the beer shop next door and you could never find him. When I went away on leave he refused to follow the instructions of the female Ukrainian deputy head of section. I had a very nice ambassador, an old Moscow hand, very old school, but in a very good way. When I came back, he said: "If

you don't sack him I will”, and I said don't worry, I would. That was my experience of trying to diversify!

A lot of the tension came about because Ukraine had been part of the former Soviet Union. This is coming out again now during the current conflict. There was a factory that theoretically didn't exist - in fact it was a conglomeration of factories - which employed about 30,000 people in Dnipropetrovsk who manufactured the nuclear warheads for Soviet weapons. When the Berlin wall fell, the Americans helped them dismantle the warheads and get rid of this extremely dangerous fuel, and then they had to find something else for all these people to do; and suddenly they were doing things like making collapsible umbrellas, and that really hurt because they'd been working in a prestigious organisation and had been security cleared to the highest level, so they were actually somebody quite important and then they were being asked to make umbrellas. This sort of thing sometimes made for quite difficult conversations with enterprises. They would say “Well you know we'd be fine - we just need \$2 million investment in this plant”, and even with my non-commercial background you could see that they needed to shut it, raze it to the ground and start again. There was nothing there that was actually going to be of any commercial value in the real world.

SLG: Were you able to travel around?

TAW: Yes and no. Largely it was just difficult because in order to go anywhere you had to have somebody to stay with and, in order to have somewhere to stay wherever you were going, you had to get permission from the Ministry for External Relations and Trade. We used to call it the Ministry for the Prevention of External Relations and Trade. Commercial officers often travelled together. The advantage of going in a group was that while some people were speaking to whoever was showing us around, the rest of us could just quietly look round and draw our own conclusions about what was useful and interesting. It was an interesting time to be there. British companies were coming in, Enterprise Oil started up there, but were royally scammed by the Ukrainians. A number of British companies went in, and American companies were there as well, and they were not treated well in the early days. They were basically replicating the Soviet Union in miniature, and it became very much more difficult after that to attract British companies - not surprisingly.

I think there has been a sea change in the succeeding decades, because, ultimately, I think it dawned on people that you can't go on running a country in that way and interact

meaningfully with the West and attract foreign investment. There was an American hotel, it was in Lviv, and was the best hotel in town. They had an American investor and while she was out of the country, they expanded the management board who then voted her off, so in spite of the fact that she had invested heavily in the hotel, she couldn't get back into it again. Now, you only need one or two stories like that, and people will not come back again to invest.

I went back to Kiev a couple of couple of years ago, for completely different purposes, and was struck by the great advances there. They have a number of western hotels now. Several hotel chains tried to come in while I was there, but they were just asked for ridiculous sums of money for doing things and so they threw up their hands and said no.

First Secretary Political, British Embassy, Belgrade, 1998-99

TAW: In 1998 I went to Belgrade for a short-term appointment, it was all in aid of Kosovo. The Belgrade embassy had to cover Kosovo and they didn't have enough people to do it, so I was sent in. I would do the reporting from Belgrade. It was actually quite a dangerous time. We had a very good military attaché though. I have had military attachés who frankly I wouldn't follow into a supermarket, but if he said duck I would duck and if he said go there, I went there. You didn't argue with him, he was ex-SAS and knew what he was doing. I got stuck in Kosovo one night and I couldn't get back up to Belgrade because the only transport had already left by the time I got there, so I stayed with some of the army in a hotel. Somebody said we'd better make you up a bed. Then I saw one of them going past the door with bits of bed. They had had to go to the store and find some spare parts to make up a bed quite literally.

The Albanians in Kosovo were being treated appallingly, but the fear was that once the position was reversed, they would in turn treat the Serbs the way they'd been treated, and I think in some instances that is what it happened.

SLG: All good training for you for a head of mission job.

Chargé d'Affaires, Tajikistan, 2001-02

TAW: I really wanted to go to Pyongyang, but the timing didn't work, and I also still wanted to go to Afghanistan. I knew at that point that I had been appointed Ambassador to Armenia,

but there was more than a year before the appointment. I was only supposed to do a year's Russian training because I already had some Ukrainian, so only needed to try and convert it. My HR officer called me and said "You know you said you wanted to go to Afghanistan?", and I said "Yes!" excitedly, thinking of a period of temporary duty in Kabul, and how I'd love to see it again, and he said "Well, how would you like to go to Dushanbe?" "Dushan-where?", I said. "Tajikistan", he said. I looked at one of those maps we had on the wall with all our posts on and said that there didn't seem to be an embassy there. "Ah ...", he said.

I had been rather envious about colleagues who had gone off and opened up embassies in the former Soviet Union and I thought that this was my chance. It was actually the scariest job I've ever done. It was at the tail end of a brutal civil war and I had to promise to abide by a UN curfew, which meant you had to be indoors by 10pm. The Tajiks were very keen to have a British embassy there, so they very kindly assigned me a nice young KGB officer every day. I couldn't stay in the best hotel in town because it was used by the Russian military, and they used to go along on Friday evenings and practise doing things like shooting out the ceiling lights. So I stayed in the Avesta Hotel in what was called a "luxe", which is the Russian for a suite. It was a ghastly hotel and it's still there. I think it's upgraded a little bit, but now they've got a Hyatt in Dushanbe. The problem was that the carpet was greasy, the bath was about three foot long and there was a boiler over it which just filled it up to about 3/4 full.

I was on my own with nobody else from the UK at the start. I hired two local people. I had a driver with his car, a very nice man who was still working for the embassy when I last went back, but as a gate guard because he never got the hang of automatic cars. I was partly there to look around and make recommendations on where we should look for an embassy building. I had to set up a satphone and practised setting it up before I left in St James Park in London, and had to avoid frying the tourists around St James's Park by getting them between the satellite link and phone. It was quite fun because in Dushanbe I had to focus the phone on a satellite over the Indian Ocean, and unfortunately my hotel suite faced the wrong way, so I had to hire another hotel room just for the phone along the corridor.

I had promised London that I would be careful. One day I went into the park and saw a man leading a bear on a chain. People were having rides on the bear and I thought that would be so much fun, to have a ride on a bear - the bear seemed to be quite happy - and then I thought "No, London would not be happy if I got eaten by a bear", so I had to forgo the bear. I

identified the sort of premises that we wanted, and recommended that we got somewhere standalone with a bit of expansion capacity because my experience was that you start off saying “Oh well we only need two people” and then you need a defence attaché and then you need somebody else and it sort of grows.

British Ambassador to Armenia, 2003-06

TAW: I was posted to Armenia in 2003 as Head of Mission. You could get in or out of the country either by flying or going overland via Iran or Georgia. All the borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey were closed. It's an extraordinary country with a very old history and manuscripts dating back centuries. It was the first country to become a Christian state. There's a massive Armenian diaspora - far more Armenians live outside Armenia than inside Armenia, not least because of what the Turks did in 1914. There is a large number of Armenians in the United States. The Armenian community is very upset about the fact that we don't use the word “genocide” in relation to what the Turks did to them. We do use the words “massacre” and “atrocities”, and we were actually one of the first countries to draw attention to what was happening at the time.

The embassy had a team of 24, five of whom were UK-based. Now I think it is reduced to two UK-based staff. We had a large aid programme, and we also had the British Council, which was really excellent. I remember I arrived in the middle of winter and looked out of the residence on my first morning and of course it was bleak and cold. I had a talk with myself. Did I really want this? But actually I grew to love the place very quickly - and the Armenians. I have an enormous respect for them.

I was unaccompanied and Reef would come out, as he always did, for visits. He enjoyed it and used to go off around the place and I sometimes took him on regional visits. You can stand on your hind legs and talk about equality of opportunity, but there's nothing like turning up for work in one of the further flung regions - I get out of the flag car and Reef does his Prince Philip bit behind me with his masculinity visibly undiminished. This extraordinary turn of events sometimes caused confusion. They were used to having male ambassadors with female wives. They hadn't quite managed to work out what to do with him, and sometimes just stuck him on the end of the table to follow the meeting.

One day in Yerevan we went off to the botanical gardens, because Reef likes gardens, and I went off in one direction and he went in the other. I came back to find him talking to a visiting British barrister. He asked him what he was doing here, and Reef said he was visiting his wife, and the gentleman said “Oh, and what does your wife do?” “She works in the embassy.” “Oh”, he said, looking at me, ‘and what do you do in the embassy?’ I said, “I try and run it, on a good day” and he said “I thought the ambassador did that” and I just said very quietly “She does”. I watched him go pinker and pinker.

I did feel a sense of pressure on this posting to the extent that there were so few of us [female ambassadors]. Nobody does anything without occasionally messing up and making mistakes. I was very conscious that if I made a complete dog's breakfast of the embassy it would be a case of “that's what happens if you put a woman in charge of an embassy”. There's a sense that you really have to try to get things right. There were some very nice other female heads of mission at the time in and around the region, and I suspect now you probably don't need to feel that.

Temporary Duty British Embassy Kabul, 2006

SLG: So you finally got back to where you wanted to go in the first place in 2006.

TAW: I was very happy to get back to Kabul because my parents had been there in the 1970s. I'd seen the country and loved it. I thought it was massively interesting. It was a very intense time and the workload was very heavy. No matter how many people they brought in to help, there was still a massive amount to do. I was liaison with the Afghans on political and military issues. I remember in particular talking to the Interior Ministry about the temporary ban on Afghan Airlines on safety grounds. Everywhere we went was in armoured vehicles and with armed guards. You got rather used to it and noticed when you came home that there was no security!

British Ambassador to Mongolia 2008-2009 and 2010-2012

SLG: You went to Mongolia the first time for a year, is that right?

TAW: It was for 18 months, until they had found a substantive successor. I had originally gone out on temporary duty, and I came back to the UK in between and did some work around Whitehall. I still really wanted to go to North Korea, and I had heard that there was

an opportunity coming up, but I went into the department, and they said no, as my successor in Mongolia had taken early retirement at very short notice, and would I go back again to Mongolia? So, I said “Well, yes”, but I wouldn't go back for three months and that I would want at least a year.

I was dealing with a rather challenging bilateral issue; in that we had arrested a member of the Mongolian security services on an EU arrest warrant issued by the Germans. This gentleman kept saying that he wanted to go to Britain, and I think we had sort of been politely ignoring the request, knowing what the difficulty was. He got on the plane and went and was of course arrested on landing and held in gaol. Obviously, it was very difficult for the Mongolians, but I think they got the message that if you're going to say you want your country to abide by the rule of law, this is what it means. The law applies to everyone. And in the event, we extradited him to Germany and the Germans released him following a legal process I was not entirely clear about, but I was grateful to have been tipped off in time so that it didn't come to us as a complete surprise. In the meantime, of course, I'd had quite a hard time of it. I'd been dragged into the foreign ministry every two weeks and given a head-scrubbing.

SLG: It is quite unusual to go back to a post having left it, but I guess it meant that you could start with your feet running?

TAW: Some people would say it was a difficult country. I have been to some “difficult” countries, but to me they were just endlessly interesting. Going back, I was able to go back into the same house with the same team.

SLG: How big was the UK staff?

TAW: I had one other UK-based deputy head and about seven local Mongolians. I lived in a compound, which normally I wouldn't like, but it meant having security and in particular having things like a generator which people living off compound did not necessarily have, and you needed air conditioning in summer, and you certainly needed heating in winter. It also meant that one's IT worked. We didn't put anything classified on it, obviously, but it did mean that for example I could email home and get an instant connection which was nice.

SLG: So you enjoyed your second two years?

TAW: Yes, it's a completely different culture. We think of culture in western terms, but their culture depends on nomadic life. It's equally complicated and interesting and of course they had the Russians, who never quite managed to collectivise the Mongolians. Herding cats springs to mind. If Mongolians are not happy, because they are nomads, they just pick up their yurts and a camel and disappear over the mountain, so it's very difficult to collectivise them. They didn't generally do collective agriculture. A lot of the time Mongolia would be frozen. A lot of very high-quality cashmere comes from Mongolia, and they have a problem with overgrazing because they tend to keep all the goats, regardless of sex. This is a deeply sexist comment, but apart from procreating, the male goats are not that much use. Their cashmere isn't that good and they eat everything, so really you want the girl goats to make jumpers, but there isn't a tradition of, for example, selective breeding.

Projects Task Force (Deputy Head, 2012, Acting Head, 2012–15)

SLG: After an interesting but perhaps difficult hardship post, you then returned to London.

TAW: I came back and did a couple of temporary jobs and then I was offered the chance to be a deputy head of the Projects Task Force, which was just in the process of being set up. I was originally the first deputy head and then we had a second deputy head. In the end we had three deputy heads as the department grew. The idea was to be able to troubleshoot in various places overseas and in the UK for different parts of the office which for one reason or another had a bulge of work and couldn't cope from within their own resources. We were also the first department to champion working from home and working remotely, which did give us some challenges. There are some things you can do remotely very successfully, and I think one of the things which possibly helped when we came to Covid and having to work from home was that by then we had this experience of what worked and what didn't work when people weren't actually in the office, or in some cases even in the same time zone.

SLG: Did you do any interesting projects during your time there?

TAW: To me the attraction was you worked in areas that you wouldn't normally, with my background in the office. One of the interesting ones was moving the Consulate General in Shanghai to a new building which we were sharing with the British Council and the Welsh Office, and it was a very interesting exercise in collaboration between various government and quasi-governmental organisations.

The other one that was particularly interesting was going out for two or three weeks to the embassy in Moscow. At the time, again, it was really quite heavily burdened with work, and there were staff morale problems, not because anybody was a poor manager but simply because people were just so busy at the top of the embassy that there hadn't been the capacity for somebody to step back and talk to people - and most importantly, of course, listen to people.

SLG: So that was your role?

TAW: They were looking for somebody to come in and look at possible changes, listen and get buy-in from across the embassy. The Deputy Head of Mission was on leave to start with, and I seem to remember I went slightly off at a tangent while he was away, but then when he came back he helped push me in the right direction and I think I did something by the end that was of use and value and there were changes that were made as a result of the exercise. I think that people felt listened to. I subsequently did a very similar project in a London department, the advantage being that if you're not actually part of the existing hierarchy you can generally get people to trust you if you say "Listen, I will tell people what you said but you will be completely anonymised". People trusted me and were able to tell me what was really on their mind and what the things were that were really upsetting them.

SLG: So this new PTF department was not just replacing the corporate pool?

TAW: The corporate pool was where you were put when you came back to the United Kingdom, and you didn't have a job. In order to get into the Projects Task Force, you had to be recruited through the normal procedure and it was competitive, the idea being specifically that it shouldn't be somewhere you were simply allocated, but it was a rather new initiative at the time for a department to be made up of remote workers, many working from home and some working overseas as well. You couldn't always get the whole of your section together at one time, but we seemed to manage, and a lot of good people applied, partly because they were in a situation where they couldn't come into the office full time for five days a week and it was a way of keeping good people who just couldn't commit to the classic standard hours.

SLG: It sounds like a good business model. I wonder how it is still existing today with everybody working from home. So, you were there nearly three years and then you were appointed ambassador to Turkmenistan in 2016.

British Ambassador to Turkmenistan, 2016-19

TAW: Turkmenistan is a closed country. There's a whole bundle of things about Turkmenistan that you have to work through, and one of them is this key question that it is one of the most repressive states in the world - possibly the most repressive after North Korea - and there is a body of opinion which believes that that we shouldn't be there, that we shouldn't be represented there, and that we should treat them as a pariah state. I think that's a legitimate perspective but it's not one I share, obviously. If you're not there in person, as an embassy, as an institution, or if for example you just fly in and out, then you don't actually know what's going on. It is such a secretive society with a secretive administration that you don't know what's going on anyway, but if you're based there you can hazard a very much better guess and make a very much better assessment.

SLG: What was it like being a female ambassador there?

TAW: It was not a problem, I found that across the former Soviet Union, because of the weight we still carry in the world, that if you have the title then people have to deal with you, and yes, you do have to demonstrate in that role that you are reasonably competent, but then I don't think that's different from a male ambassador arriving in post. They still have to demonstrate their worth. I've always thought it's an enormous advantage that women can say things sometimes that men can't say because it would sound overly aggressive. The way that I dealt with it was not to slag them off in public, but to be very upfront in private and say exactly what we thought about their human rights record and the way in which they conducted themselves internally.

SLG: What were conditions like living there?

TAW: I had a delightful residence. It was technically below one's size entitlement, but it was delightful, a Turkmen bungalow around a little courtyard with a patch of grass and a guard hut on the one side, and it had a very useful enormous sitting/dining room so that you could fit in a lot of people. The Turkmen would not come - a few exceptions were the scholarship students - because I think that they felt very vulnerable in a western environment.

The other thing of course which was very frustrating was that while I'm not somebody who does social media in a private capacity, in an office capacity it's a very useful tool and it was

virtually impossible to do in Turkmenistan because everything was jammed. We did have a Facebook account and some people could access it but, on the whole, even in Internet cafes access was limited as to what people could see.

SLG: Were you on Twitter then?

TAW: No, even on Facebook people were very nervous about interacting with the embassy because the contact was misconstrued. I had a UK-based deputy, an extremely able woman called Lynn Smith, to start with, and subsequently David Pert, also a tower of strength. It's very important in a mission where there are just two UK-based staff that you get on and that you can both use your weight in different ways. In both cases I could safely leave the mission for a couple of weeks and go off and sort of regroup and come home, and know that I would come back to the mission, and it would be running smoothly, which is saying quite a lot because they are comparatively junior posts.

SLG: What grade would deputy be in somewhere like Turkmenistan?

TAW: A first secretary in Turkmenistan. Initially a third secretary in Mongolia. It did subsequently change, I think partly because of the difficulties that had arisen historically over time as it was too much responsibility, because when things went wrong in Mongolia you were too far away. We had the state of emergency at one stage, I was actually on my own at the time. But if that had happened with a third secretary in charge of the embassy, then I think London would have been quite worried, as that does seem a lot of responsibility for a third secretary.

High Commissioner to Tonga, 2019–20

SLG: But Turkmenistan was not quite your last hopes overseas posting?

TAW: No. Tonga was an absolute delight, and I was heartbroken to have to leave when Covid broke out. We were reopening our High Commission after a break of some decades.

SLG: So you went out at the beginning of 2020?

TAW: I was literally only there for a very short time, borrowing an office in the New Zealand High Commission, and we managed to move into our own office space, also in the New

Zealand building, while I was there. The residence had been designated and the building was being finished off when I left.

SLG: Well that's a great shame that you weren't able to stay in Tonga longer.

TAW: Yes, one day I hope to go back and see how they're getting on. It is the purest version of South Pacific culture. It's never been colonised, by us or by anybody else, and so they kept their culture, and it affects everything including the division of land and social interactions. I would love to have stayed longer and got further into it.

FCO COVID-19 Repatriation Cell

I went into the Covid repatriation unit, which was focused on bringing back to the UK those people who were trapped overseas because of the virus. There were a lot of people on cruise ships. Of course when you had an outbreak on a cruise ship other countries did not want that cruise ship docking in the port, and if you got them to dock how did you get them back to this country if you had infection on board? It was a massive operation. I didn't find it a particularly happy time, maybe because I like, and I'm actually better at, running my own show, and we had a rotating cast of senior members of the service, most of whom were extremely able but each having their own view as to how every day the work should be taken forward, and I found that frustrating. One got through it. I had an absolutely brilliant team. I was very concerned with a large team to touch base with each of them at least once a week one-to-one to see if things weren't going well.

It was a very difficult time in unknown circumstances wasn't it?

We had some terrific people working on the information side which is what I was doing. I did ring up one colleague to find that her grandmother had just died of Covid, and that's the sort of thing that if you're in an office with people you find out straight away and you can see. Also, some people found it much more stressful than others to work from home, because people's home circumstances are completely different. Some people could do it quite easily while some people were sharing flats with other people who are trying to work from home and unless you go round to people individually you don't pick up on somebody being unhappy and stressed out because we're all these amazingly resilient people and we all want to be seen as resilient and not to act as a drag on the rest of the office. I would say that all my

team were immensely conscientious, and unless I went out to them I wouldn't find out that things were not going well.

SLG: That was your final appointment in the office - you left during Covid

TAW: That was OK as I gave everybody, I think, three months' notice, so that there was plenty of time to recruit a successor and they had the whole of the Foreign Office working on Covid. I didn't flatter myself that the office would come to its knees if I backed out of running a small portion of the repatriation cell. People were incredibly kind. There was a mass zoom call, and somebody managed to engineer to have in the background the official photograph of me from my last posting, which was quite surreal. You plugged in to the call and there were about 32 pictures of me looking at me!

SLG: So it was a good send off after what was 46 years' service in the Foreign Office, now Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office. Thorda, thank you very much for talking to me it has been very interesting to hear about all the places you've been, you certainly had a very interesting career in a lot of not always easy places.

TAW: Sometimes you get it right and sometimes you get some of it wrong. Yes, there are things that if I started now I might do differently, but I think I was extraordinarily lucky. Thank you.

Ends