

## TALES OF DIPLOMACY

*Talk by Alan Charlton, former diplomat, ambassador to Brazil, deputy ambassador in Washington and around the world*

It was Friday March 13<sup>th</sup> when members last gathered in the Friary Hall for our monthly talk. There were some concerns about a strange new virus which seemed to be spreading, and George advised us that we would await further instructions, but for now it was very much the old adage "Keep calm and carry on". I sat chatting to several people, queued for a cup of tea afterwards, and then caught a bus home busy with shoppers and school pupils. How strange and reckless that seems now, and how little could we guess what was ahead for us all.

Swept along in a strange time which one moment seems to have stopped, and the next to be moving at twice the usual speed, we found ourselves at our next meeting, on another Friday 13<sup>th</sup>, but in November, and on-line. How was it going to work? Would anybody actually sign on? Would we all be judging each other's bookshelves? Thanks in no small part to the work of the committee, especially Jan Morris, it all went really well. At over 70 the attendance exceeded even the busiest of our usual meetings, and it was a most enjoyable and entertaining afternoon. As for judging our bookshelves ...

Alan's talk was just what was needed to whisk us away from lock-down in Crawley for a brief hour or so. As we perched on our office chairs, or lounged on our sofas, he took us on a world tour, beginning in Jordan in the early 1980s and ending in Brazil in 2013, taking in Berlin and Washington on the way. We were surprised to see snow in Jordan; we were reminded of Hurricane Katrina in 2005; we were envious of the beautiful homes assigned to Alan and his family (a statue by Henry Moore in the garden, anyone?), and we ticked off celebrities encountered over the years. Well, meeting the Queen three times, having Prince Charles and Camilla in your house, bumping into Prince Harry, meeting Edward Kennedy and having the Clintons as neighbours; quite a lot of names to drop there, which Alan did, in the nicest possible way.

Possibly the most fascinating tales were from his time in Berlin, from 1986 to 1990, when it was still, of course, a divided city. Alan was allowed to cross, at the famous Checkpoint Charlie, to visit the Soviet Embassy. The scenes he showed were so familiar to us, from all those films and television programmes, that it was sometimes hard to remember that these were photos taken by him when he was there, and it was chilling to think of those who had died trying to cross from East to West. One man, indeed, died close to Alan's home, having made a desperate bid to escape by balloon. Rudolf Hess was at this time still imprisoned in Spandau Prison, and after he died Alan was instrumental in arranging for his body to be taken to Munich for burial.

A man of many talents, not least the ability to give a really interesting talk. Please come back one day Alan; with luck when we are all able to meet in person.

*Jean Austin*