

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

OLIVER PLATT

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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 16th of October and we're conducting an interview with Oliver Platt, Foreign Service family member. We're going to talk about sort of what your experiences were. In fact Oliver, you started out overseas.

PLATT: That's right, very briefly. I started out in Windsor, Ontario. I think I was only there for a matter of months before my mom and dad moved back to Washington. I think we actually lived in Alexandria, Virginia. I cannot say I have any memory of it. And then when I was three we moved to Taiwan for a year of language training -- Chinese language training.

Q: Right. Now at three you wouldn't have much of a recollection but after that your father was assigned to Hong Kong.

PLATT: I do have some memories. I claim to have some memories of Taiwan but they could be sort of interlapping with pictures of stuff but I have memories.

Q: Because by then let's see you have an older brother.

PLATT: Yes, an older brother and a younger brother.

Q: And what do you recall from that time? You might have lived in a compound, probably not running out on the street all the time.

PLATT: Well no, which time in particular?

Q: Taiwan -- do you recall?

PLATT: What I remember -- well, we went to a Chinese kindergarten and we were literally picked up in a huge tricycle that had a tin box on the back and we wore pinafores and we all got in the back of this massive tricycle bus. And you wouldn't blame me for

remembering that! And it wasn't an unpleasant memory it was just sort of what it was. And then I also remember Christmas morning, my dad, who was a trickster, taking us out and showing us reindeer tracks in the mud outside of our house. Even though if you really think about it, they should have been on the roof so what's up with that?

Q: And I think that's probably the Foreign Service parents' problem -- how do you keep the kids connected to the U.S. and its ceremonies and that sort of thing.

PLATT: And you know that's really the most -- they were very good at that. We have a strong, close extended family. My parents' particular brilliance was in making sure we also really explored the cultures that we were in. There were a lot of empty families. The kids would basically spend most of their time around the embassy swimming pool eating cheeseburgers and listening to Led Zeppelin -- not that there is anything wrong with that but they were definitely trying to pretend that they were not where they were. My parents were very aggressive about getting added into the culture.

Q: After language training you moved to Hong Kong for your father's [Nicholas Platt] assignment. Hong Kong is very urban, very steep, what do you recall living in that environment?

PLATT: Hong Kong is where you can sort of imagine based on my age -- where I became aware of the world. And the truth is that the mid sixties, Hong Kong was a beautiful island in the south China Sea with white sandy beaches. There were four years between when we left Hong Kong in 1968 to when we revisited. In those days, to get to the mainland you had to go to Hong Kong and go to Kowloon and then take a train to the border and spend the night in Canton and fly. We called it Canton back then now of course it's Guangzhou.

We used to live in this beautiful apartment building that overlooked the botanical gardens and had a view of the bay and the harbor and literally just in the four years from 1968 to '72 when we went back and we went back to our old apartment, you could no longer see the harbor because of all the construction in those four years. I can't remember the next time we went to Hong Kong but it was just astonishing, the development. But I have very pleasant memories of Hong Kong.

Q: It would have been good and crowded. But now Hong Kong wouldn't be a place where you would particularly stand out as Foreign Service children, would it?

PLATT: No. I think there was a big international community in Hong Kong. And more importantly, the international community was free to go where they wanted, as opposed to China back then -- your movements were pretty proscribed.

Q: Now after Hong Kong you come back to the Washington area. You're about eight years old.

PLATT: Yeah.

Q: And something I read about you said that at this time you went to a performance at the Kennedy Center and became quite focussed on the idea of acting.

PLATT: That's true. That was when I was a little bit older but the first experience that I had of acting -- I was not a very skilled new kid and the transition from Hong Kong back to the States was not an easy one. For whatever reason I was the only new kid in my class and for all intents and purposes I was a little hybrid, a weird British kid who spoke funny and wore knee socks.

And I ended up in the Christmas pageant as the inn keeper. And I had one line, turning Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus away from the inn. And you know, I'm sure I massacred it. But there was this big response. And I knew what being laughed at was and this was not that. This was a dose of the positive.

It's a disorienting thing being in a new culture -- you're trying to figure out the rules and not even knowing that there were going to be a new set of rules, you know? And what happened as a result of that -- because I kept on of course being a new kid every three or four years -- I figured out that if I went and auditioned for a play, then of course people tend to gravitate toward what they're good at and you tend to like what you're good at. I liked doing it but it was a survival mechanism. It was a way of instant camaraderie, instant sub-culture that I could plug into. And that's a powerful thing when you're a kid.

Q: Isn't that what a lot of your contemporary Foreign Service friends probably said? 'I come back to the States, I don't know the music, I don't know the dance steps and whatnot.' You feel as funny back as you might have felt overseas.

PLATT: That's right. That's absolutely right. Because I sort of became conscious as a human being in Hong Kong, the first move back to DC was particularly startling.

Q: Once you were able to adjust to the States, then you're off again and you have all this stuff about Nixon's trip to China and your dad's involved in all of that. How much did you understand at that time of what he was about and doing?

PLATT: Precisely because my parents always made sure that we celebrated and did as much as we could to involve ourselves and absorb as much of the culture of whatever environment we were in and also because we were a close family, I remember very, very clearly the excitement for him of all of those successive visits -- [Secretary of State William] Rogers and [National Security Advisor Henry] Kissinger and then Nixon and then being actually assigned to go to work there -- for him that was an extraordinarily exciting thing.

Q: And isn't that the point? Sometimes the parents set the tone. "Oh boy, we're going to a new post, you guys are going to really like this!," instead of "Oh my god, we've been moved again."

PLATT: That's right and you make a very good point. For us it was always an exciting thing. And obviously it's not to say that in retrospect there weren't tradeoffs? But two things happen to families that move around a lot like that. They either disintegrate very quickly or they get very, very close and fortunately our family fell on the latter category. But as you can imagine as I'm sure you know, the divorce rate in the Foreign Service is high.

Q: As you're back in the States from '69 to '73 what kinds of summer vacations did you guys take?

PLATT: We went to camp, we would visit family, and we had a certain amount of structured activities, a certain amount of messing around. We would always end the summer up in Maine.

Q: Do you recall at this time, say the early seventies, that you were a strong reader or had some particular subjects that you were quite focused in reading about?

PLATT: We were all pretty good readers. I was a bit of an Agatha Christie guy. You could imagine in the early days we had Tintin backwards and forwards and then when I was older I actually got into Elmore Leonard. Loved me some Elmore Leonard, became an Elmore Leonard freak. I would say I was an eclectic reader. I would not call myself a voracious, high-minded reader -- War and Peace probably wasn't on my syllabus. A fair amount of Archie, Batman, that sort of thing.

Q: Now in the summer of 73, you leave the States and you go to Beijing and this in itself is quite an adventure. As you say, you got there via Hong Kong, plane from Guangzhou...in fact I think your dad in his book says he comes down from Beijing to meet you, meet the family.

PLATT: We'll never, ever forget that. You had to spend the night in Canton at the hotel and we got there and we got in a car and my parents wanted to go out into the city. I think we were taken into maybe an antique store or something like that. I remember a big, wide empty street -- not a lot of cars, you know -- and we get out of the car and we go into the antique store. And I was 13 years old, I was not wildly interested in antiques, I don't remember what I was looking at, maybe my shoes, but all of a sudden the room became perceptibly darker. It just got strangely dark and so I thought thunderstorm, eclipse? And we looked out the window and the street was literally full of people and these people were pressed up against this window looking in at us because my younger brother had blonde hair and we were tall, we were weird looking and they just hadn't seen a lot of foreigners. Maybe it was this particular neighborhood. Chinese are very polite, gracious people but it was literally as if they were looking at Martians. And you can imagine as a teenager you're self conscious. It was startling. We got used to it but I'll never forget that.

Q: Now once you get up in Beijing, the housing accommodations for families at this time is spartan to say the least.

PLATT: We had an apartment but you know it was comfortable. We were pretty adaptable. I took it for granted that my parents were the way they were but I'm realizing talking to you how skillful they were, how good they were, at creating a sense of excitement about every new place. They were these brilliant spinmasters. But they did make it fun. They made it fun and that's a gift.

Q: You're arriving in July. It's the American July 4th and obviously the embassy would have some sort of reception or shindig. Did you get involved in that right off the bat?

PLATT: Whatever happened I'm sure we were involved. You know it was not a big community. It wasn't even an embassy when we were there. It was a Liaison Office because you know President Nixon had to let the Taiwanese down slowly and that had yet to happen so it couldn't be an embassy yet formally because we still had an embassy in Taipei. That didn't happen for a few years until after we left.

I remember my heroes -- the people that were the Marine Security Guards, who were just the coolest. And we did stuff together. The Marine Security Guards, if they were off duty they came to our parties. It was a small community.

Q: And very family oriented.

PLATT: Absolutely.

Q: Now at that time there in China, certainly Beijing, everybody is on bicycles.

PLATT: Everybody.

Q: Does that include the Platt family?

PLATT: Absolutely. We went everywhere on bicycles. We had a small, red Toyota but you know it was used sparingly because there was a proscribed -- there literally was a diplomatic ghetto where we could sort of travel pretty freely but I think when we -- and you know I'm sure I'm probably remembering this, what the actual regulations were, you would need to check -- but I very much had this sense that there were certain places we could go without having to check in with the government. But again, that was a proscribed area. Forget about just having to check if you wanted to travel, you had to permission to literally go to the other side of the city.

Q: We're talking about those early days living in Beijing and you're right about traveling around Beijing but then at the end of July, the family begins to travel around China and this is where you've got to get the permission and that becomes quite the difficult thing to do. Unfortunately, according to your father's book, your participation in this trip is interrupted.

PLATT: Yes, by my little interaction with the generator.

Q: Yes. Oops.

PLATT: We were at Wuhan University, which is the geographical and industrial equivalent of Pittsburgh in the sense that two rivers, the Yangtze River and the Yellow River, met and formed. It was a huge steel production. Steel was the industry of the region. It was the steel capital, certainly one of the steel capitals of China.

There was a famous technical university there. We were having a tour of this technical university and we were up on this tower. It had a view of the river at this university and it had a little balcony on it and there was a manual generator for the lights in case anybody important ever got up there and it was dark. Like a lot of the technology at that time it was very dated. We all thought it was beautiful. It was very Buck Rogers, you know? It looked very different than anything from a refrigerator to a car. Their concept of “modern” was relative.

This thing -- there was a very heavy fixed wheel. I don't know how to describe how a generator works but there was a fixed wheel and there was a moving wheel. And you would move the wheel and it made a really cool noise. And you could imagine, I was not terribly interested in whatever the wise guide was droning on about and just as I was telling my brother to be careful not to get his finger caught in it, it stopped and I pulled out this bloody nub and I looked at it for about a second and I literally could see the bone sticking out and then I howled like a banshee.

I think we still have this souvenir. I was reading “Ten Little Indians,” the Agatha Christie novel and it got slimed. The other interesting thing was that you have your guide who is taking you around and explaining things to you and then you have your minder, somebody who is usually following at a distance just wanting you to know that you were being watched. But when this happened and I made this blood curdling yell of probably much more terror than pain at that point, it was amazing how many people seemed to literally pop out of closets, or rather, cars. All of a sudden, I mean in an instant, much faster than if somebody could have called them than if one of us had called them. There were two or three cars there. In retrospect, it spoke to the fact that, yeah, there was one person following us and keeping an eye on us that we knew about but many, many more that we didn't.

Q: Now this was actually summer vacation for you because even though the folks were going to be stationed in Beijing, you and your brother were to go to boarding school.

PLATT: Yes.

Q: Did you then go off to boarding school?

PLATT: I went to boarding school for a year. That was Eaglebrook in Deerfield, Massachusetts.

Q: I ask because of course your father has this traffic accident and he comes home. He comes back, he leaves Beijing. At that period of time you stayed at Eaglebrook?

PLATT: Yes. He wasn't actually reassigned -- I remember we still went back to Beijing for Christmas. To answer your question, I did stay at Eaglebrook for a year because they didn't leave Beijing until the spring or the late winter.

Q: The accident was in November but it took some time for the consequences to emerge.

PLATT: Yeah. My dad -- his account is the one to go by, but it was a complicated affair. The way they dealt with situations like that was somewhat Orwellian.

Q: Now the year at Eaglebrook -- what grade was that?

PLATT: Eighth.

Q: Grade eight. And what was that boarding school like for you?

PLATT: You know, I think it was a fine school. The important thing was, through no fault of Eaglebrook's, I didn't want to be there. Despite what an incredibly exciting thing it was for my dad, the fact was that there literally was no school there for my older brother and me. We could have correspondence courses, which is what my younger brother did. There were boarding schools for kids our age and the decision was made that we would go to them. For me and for our family, that was a low moment. That was when the double-edged sword was sharpest for me.

Q: Now do I understand that both you and Adam went to Eaglebrook?

PLATT: No, Adam went to Middlesex.

Q: After that year, eighth grade, what kind of subjects were you taking or was it just kind of a lost year?

PLATT: It wasn't a lost year. It was a good school. I was a little knocked off my act. I was pretty homesick. But in terms of being a school, it was a very good school. The subjects I'm sure were similar subjects to what everybody was studying in that sort of setup.

Q: After that year in Eaglebrook and your father's career stabilizes, the family is sent out to the embassy in Tokyo and you and Adam joined them then?

PLATT: Yes.

Q: In '74. Here you've gone to China which has basically just opened up and now you're in Japan. You've gone from un-modern China to very modern Japan. How did that strike you at the time?

PLATT: I remember Tokyo was incredibly exciting. You can imagine the contrast, right? All of a sudden we're turning into teenagers and we have the freedom that comes with that. Also, Tokyo is not only a really exciting city but it's also an extraordinarily safe city. We were turned loose a little bit. It was such a fascinating culture and it was a great place to be a teenager. Once again, you know, my parents also were very, very aggressive about assimilation. My parents -- the way we'd travel, we'd take a trip and then there would be side trips and then there would be side trips to the side trips. My parents were voracious travelers which was a wonderful thing.

Q: You must have had a significant opportunity to get around Japan quite a bit?

PLATT: We did.

Q: Did you get down to Hiroshima?

PLATT: We didn't for whatever reason. We traveled a lot but we never went to Hiroshima. I never did anyway. Also, we were going back and forth. Just because I didn't get to Hiroshima doesn't mean they didn't.

Q: Now at what time in this Japan experience did you go off to boarding school in Colorado?

PLATT: Sophomore year.

Q: So then you were only in Yokohama for a year?

PLATT: In Tokyo for a year, but it was still my home. So you know, back there for the summers. We lived in Japan until I was seventeen or so.

Q: After you graduated from the Rocky Mountain school in Colorado, you got into Tufts University. Why did you pick Tufts?

PLATT: I wanted to go to school in the Northeast, I wanted to go to school in Boston. I became fixated on going to school in the Boston area. Tufts had a really good drama department. I was looking for the best possible combination between liberal arts and drama and Tufts really checked that box. It had a really, really strong drama program. I was smart enough, I was wise enough to not want to go to a conservatory. I had wise people tell me that conservatory at that young an age was a bad idea, that you needed to go get an education. That was really a good idea for life but that's a good idea for an actor too, to have the best broad-based education you could.

Q: In all this moving around as a Foreign Service kid, did things like the Boy Scouts get organized overseas or back in Washington?

PLATT: No and that was a casualty of the lifestyle. You're never in one place long enough to get involved in that kind of thing in any sort of consistent basis. And who knows? Maybe my parents avoided that because they knew that you'd be interrupting it. So they probably were concentrating on that kind of thing that they knew were designed to be short-term programs.

Q: Now you've had a stellar career on stage, and in the movies, and on television, but let me ask you this: Were any of the characters drawn from your Foreign Service experience?

PLATT: No. Not in a specific sense at all. I've played a few sort of functionary, heavy-hitting, sort of government types, and the only thing that growing up in that environment did was that it made you realize how human all those people were. And everybody of course is a human being, but it de-mystified that culture for me.

Q: I see one of the most recent things you've done is something called "Chinese Zodiac" with Jackie Chan. Did that have Hong Kong aspects to it?

PLATT: No, no. Of course I was always a huge Jackie Chan fan and Jackie asked me to go and do that. It was a movie that was always only going to be released in China. For me, it was a really fun opportunity to work in a kind of style in a movie that is literally a sort of Jackie Chan, Hong Kong-movie style. But also my father was going to be in Beijing during those dates and so it was a bit of a junket. It was really fun to work with Jackie. What's really fun for me as an actor is when you get to work in different movie cultures and different movie styles and that was something that was a really far afield for me and yet at the same time sort of home.

End of interview