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

MARGARET JONES PALMER

Interviewed by: Jewell Fenzi
Initial interview date: February 25, 1992

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Accompanying FSO husband on Assignments

Nairobi, Kenya	1941-1945
Voyage to Nairobi	
E. Talbot Smith	
Consular district	
Introduction to life in Kenya	
Birth of son	
Environment	
Living conditions	
American laborers	
British	
"Waffle eaters"	
Code work	
Kenya Women's Emergency Organization	
Health	
Rough return to US via USAF	
Department of State (Alexandria, VA)	1945-1948
Mink stole	
Neighbors	
Africa bureau	
Harry Villard	
London, England	1949-1953
Husband/s Africa responsibilities	
Ann Penfield	
Speakers Bureau	
Suez crisis	
Arthur Ringwalt	
Husband and wife recollections	
Nubar Gulbenkian	
Life in the Foreign Service	
Official entertaining	
National Days	
Directive changing role of spouse	
Department of State	1953-1958
Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia; Spouse of Consul General	1958-1959
Ian Smith	
Lagos, Nigeria: Wife of the United States Ambassador	1960-1963
Housing	

INTERVIEW

Q: This is Jewell Fenzi on and I am interviewing Margaret Jones Palmer at her home on February 25, 1992.

Could we look at your scrapbook?

PALMER: It's almost falling apart. The story was -- Tom Jones was a writer, a newspaper editor, and as we remember it when we were growing up, Teddy Roosevelt in 1909 came down to Atlanta and there was a poetry reading. One of the children stood up and read some poems that were written by my grandmother and he (Roosevelt) was

carried away. They were just little poems, really; and he asked to see my father afterwards.

About three months later, my father was offered a job as Vice and Deputy Consul in Glasgow, Scotland. Well, my mother and father had never been abroad, and they thought why not? They'd been married four years, they had lost their first child and thought this is a marvelous thing to do. So they went to Scotland, and these are the stories that I grew up on -- life in the Foreign Service. It didn't connect in my mind until years and years afterward how they had left the U.S. and gone abroad -- it was a very long voyage in those days in wooden sailing ships, really, not in big ocean liners at all.

They loved Scotland, and lived in an apartment next door to Sir James and Sir Peter Coats, the thread-manufacturing people. They were bachelor brothers and took my mother and father, who were a young couple, under their wing and really saw that they had a marvelous time in Scotland. Of course they went all over the Continent. This was in Queen Victoria's time, I imagine, wasn't it?

Q: Yes. (looking in scrapbook) And look at the invitation from Whitelaw Reid! [1910] (both laughing)

PALMER: Look at the things we saved!

Q: Oh but how marvelous. (reading from newspaper clipping) "Tom Jones Writes of Ruins in Scotland." Did your mother save diaries, journals?

PALMER: She saved a cookbook that she wrote -- all the Scottish recipes, with the price of the bits of cod and the fish that go into the recipes. She bought and saved for us huge banquet cloths. You know, the wonderful Irish and Scottish linens, which we still used all throughout our own Foreign Service years.

Q: Twenty-four feet long --

PALMER: -- this big. This is only part of the scrapbook that's left from all that that went on. So these are the stories that we were told when we were growing up when Daddy and Mother lived in Scotland and Daddy was in the Foreign Service. In those days Foreign Service Officers received no salary at all, it was all Consular fees from shipping and various things that came through the office. They lived in an apartment with stone walls, my mother said that moisture would drip down the walls and the floors were always damp --

Q: And cold.

PALMER: -- and cold, my father had apparently some sinus problems, and at the end of two years the State Department said that there was an opening in Trieste, would they like to go there? However, my grandmother, bless her heart, fell apart and said "it's time you

came home and started living a normal life the way you were supposed to." So they didn't do that, they didn't pursue this at all, they came home --

Q: Were they very young, or were you born very late in their life?

PALMER: They married in 1907 and I was born in 1916. Which was four or five years after they came back. They had a little girl in 1913, I was born in 1916, then later on two brothers; we were four. We grew up on these stories, and I always felt that I would love to go abroad.

Q: I was going to say, it must have been an inspiration for you to go to Hamburg in 1938.

PALMER: Well, that came about after I went to the University of Georgia, where I knew Tap Bennett. In my senior year I was offered an exchange scholarship to Heidelberg University. I thought this was great "but my family probably won't let me go." I came home during spring break and announced that I had an offer of a scholarship to Heidelberg, thinking they would say "no way, there's no way you can go," and my mother said, "of course you can go." This really threw me, because I thought, "I don't know whether I WANT to go or not!" (both laughing)

Q: Maybe that was her psychology, right?

PALMER: To make a long story short, I went; in June, and I was meant to stay nine months and finish my senior year in Heidelberg. I ended up staying over two and a half years, during which time I finished my studies and was dying to stay. Mind you, this was 1938. Everything was brewing in Germany, and during the spring break in '38, I knew from being with the students there that something was happening. I got on a train during spring vacation of the month of March and went to Vienna...was there when Hitler marched in.

The little student hotel I was staying in was turned into a barracks for the soldiers. Travel was frozen, and money was frozen. So I had to wait the eight days in order to get out. I had no money, only German marks which were useless. There again, that's my next contact with the Foreign Service. Some place in the recesses of my mind I thought, "I really should find an American Embassy," which I did. They changed money for me and made sure I had enough to pay my hotel bill and eat while I was there!

Q: Why did you have to stay eight days?

PALMER: Because I was on a student vacation ticket. I felt the Anschluss going to happen; everybody in Germany knew, but I don't think many of the other European nations really knew what was going on. I kept writing letters back to the U.S., which I still have upstairs. Rather than a diary I kept all the letters from Heidelberg. During my studies there Hitler came to Heidelberg, and because I was in the school of journalism, I was able to get an interview with him. It turned out to be really a joke, because HE

interviewed ME. I was very young and inexperienced. Now, you're an interviewer, and you know how things can turn around and the interviewer becomes the interviewee? But anyway, it was a face-to-face meeting, which I was very happy to get.

Q: (laughing) I would say, that's an understatement. Do you have his interview with you?

PALMER: I cannot find it, it must be somewhere, because I did it for the Atlanta Journal. They published it in 1938. I was trying to recall the other day whether it was the Journal or the Athens (Georgia) Banner-Herald. It didn't seem very important in those days, except that I had had the opportunity to meet Hitler. All my friends were members of the SS and SR, there was a great group of us in those wonderful student ways when you sat in wine cellars and nursed a little bit of apple juice, or a beer. But you sat and listened to people discuss what was going to happen.

Q: Your German must have been very fluent.

PALMER: In that length of time, yes I hope so! Otherwise I couldn't have gotten a job in Hamburg. At the end of the nine months I wrote to my father, "I really don't want to come home and go back to the University of Georgia and finish" -- I think it was two courses I needed for a degree. He wrote back, "Well, if you're serious, why don't you try the various Consular establishments, try Berlin, try London, try Hamburg, try Stuttgart." So I sat down and typed out a form letter which I sent to all of them, and I had affirmative answers from all of them saying "yes, if you're an American, if you can speak German, we could use you."

For some reason, because I had lots of friends there I chose Hamburg. I thought, "That's a port city. Not if but when anything happens, that would be the place to be rather than Berlin or even Vienna." So I went. I had to sell my motorcycle in order to get there, went up and was interviewed, and was taken on. That was in September 1938. I was in the Consulate General in Hamburg for that whole winter, all during the winter. You remember "Kristallnacht," the "night of broken glass," when all the store windows of the Jewish shops were shattered. I was sent out the next day to report on that.

In the Consulate General in Hamburg I was put in the Visa section because it was the time when huge numbers of Jews were trying to get out of Europe -- Polish, Czechoslovakian, all would come to the port cities. It was really heartbreaking because there were thousands and thousands. The quota numbers were so high [sic] that you knew most would never make it. Impassioned letters from relatives in the States sent affidavits of support, but you knew they were not going to be able to leave. There were a lot of suicides. I gave English lessons to many refugees at night after work, and helped a great many of them improve their English, those that were going over.

One thing that struck me when I first arrived in Hamburg -- and this is absolutely nothing against foreign wives, either, they are just wonderful and contributed an awful lot to our Service -- but in the huge Consulate General there was only one American wife, which I

found amazing. I loved and admired them all. And in those days, any American staff member, as I was, was immediately made part of the official family. We went to every single reception, you were wined and dined and taken care of.

But there was, to my way of thinking, a Polish household, a Swedish household, a French household, a Latvian household, and all the men were very American. But at home, those weren't American homes. I thought, "If I ever" -- in those days I was already planning that one day I would join the Foreign Service, -- "I will establish an American home." Now, that's probably not a very valid comment.

Q: It's very valid, because a few years before that William Bullitt, when he was Ambassador to the USSR (as it was in those days) sat at his dinner table in Spaso House, at a staff dinner, and looked around the table and saw no American wives at all. I have not yet done careful research on this but I have been told that he instituted the ruling we had in place for a while, that a Foreign Service Officer had to formally submit his resignation before marrying a foreign-born woman. Of course, in 1945, after World War II, the Department was so inundated with foreign-born wives and the people from other agencies who came in, in addition to AID, Treasury, et cetera -- as one of my older interviewees said, "all those letters that came into the State Department after World War II," (laughing) meaning AID, USIA.

PALMER: Well, the vast majority of Foreign Service Officers went abroad when they were young, of a marriageable age, and they were introduced to very attractive girls and they all became engaged and they all got married. But still, down deep inside, I thought, "They're wonderful, these are dear and sweet people and I love them but they're not American and they do not project an American home."

Q: I was at a luncheon recently, and a nurse was there whose husband I believe is retired from the Service was called out on temporary duty, and she said, "I want to tell you something for your Project: I went to (I forget the post at this point) and there were no American wives." And she said exactly what you've just said, they're wonderful women.

PALMER: And the children weren't American either.

Q: No! But she said, "they cannot project the American warmth, they cannot create American homes," just what you said.

PALMER: I think that stuck with me.

Q: So, then, did you have to flee from --

PALMER: As war clouds loomed nearer, all American women were not only encouraged, but were told to leave. I left on the last U.S. Line ship from Hamburg, the United States, the day we edged into Southampton on the way home war was declared, September 3, 1939. I had left all my things, that were important to me at that age, my books, my skis,

my everything, I had left back in Hamburg because I thought "I will go back." Again I was wholly immersed and felt that I really had a contribution to make -- as you do when you're in your early 20's.

I came back to the U.S. and went to Savannah where my mother and father lived. They both said, "You will never leave again." This made me very uneasy because my father added, "You can apply and receive a job on the Savannah Morning News." That was an exciting prospect in journalism which was still my first love. Savannah is such a beautiful town, and all my friends said, "Why did you leave? Everything you want is right here." I felt terrible underneath; I thought, "I've seen too much, I don't think I can come back."

I'd been home about three weeks and had a letter from the State Department saying they had formed a special division to deal with the relatives in the U.S. who were trying to find out what happened to their relatives in Europe because of the War, and that I could have a job there. My father said, "Go! It's your life." My mother said, "Please don't." But I said, "Let me go just for a little while." This was just to Washington. So I traveled back to Washington was in the special division for some months.

During that time, a secretariat for the 8th American Scientific Congress was being formed. Warren Kelchner was the head of the International Conferences bureau, and I was placed directly under Alexander Wetmore, director of the Smithsonian Institution. I worked on that the rest of that winter and into the spring, I thought, "I like this, but I really want to go abroad." Senator George of Georgia, who was on the Foreign Relations Committee and a dear friend of my father's, said, "Let me try and find out what the prospects are. I can't offer anything but I can find out."

He wrote George Messersmith -- Cordell Hull was Secretary of State -- and said, "My dear friend's daughter is looking into find out what the prospects are" and so forth, and he said, "There's an opening in Mexico City." I thought, "It's not Germany, it's not Europe, but at least it's abroad!" (both laugh)

Q: And not too far from home.

PALMER: Well, that didn't matter at this point, I just wanted to get out. The War was still going on, and I had friends in the Foreign Service whom I had met in Germany -- there was Charlie Thayer, there was Dick Davis, Carlos Warner, a group of them in the Class of 1940, which at that point -- do you remember the name Cornelia Bassell?

Q: Oh yes, of course.

PALMER: Miss Bassell! She sat like this, and passed approval (or disapproval!) of anybody who dated vice consuls much less married them. Mr. Messersmith called me in and he said, "Now Miss Jones, we have an opening in Mexico City. They're combining the Embassy and the Consulate General and you can be useful in some capacity. I have to ask you some personal questions," (which they wouldn't do any more.) "Are you engaged

to be married?" I said, "No, not really but sort of." (both laugh)

Q: But you hadn't met your husband at that point.

PALMER: No, but I was very much interested in somebody else who had just been transferred to China -- and this was a blow! I had met him in Hamburg. He had said, "I'll go out and find out what it's all about and then let you know." And I thought, "Hmmm, that's not going to work." Messersmith went on, "You're not tied up with anyone right now?" And I said, "No, to be perfectly honest I'm not. Why?" And he said, "Because we have very bad luck with the girls we send out. We train them and instruct them and they go out and the next thing you know they're married." (laughter) And I said, "Oh no, no, I assure you."

So, off I went to Mexico, with Jane Wilson Poole -- does that ring a bell? She was the editor of the Foreign Service Journal. She and I became very friendly and she said, "If you're going to Mexico I'm going to go along with you, just on a vacation." Jane and I went off to Mexico and she was there for about two weeks with me. It was a very warm atmosphere. Now we did have a lot of American wives down there and, like Hamburg, they immediately scooped me up and I became a part of everything. Josephus Daniels, who was the Ambassador, and his wife, were real characters, and I loved it.

But I met Joe the very first day and had this terrible feeling inside, I thought, "What will the State Department say??!" (hearty laughter) We soon became secretly engaged, and we thought nobody knew, you see. One day George Shaw, the Consul General, came in to my desk and he ripped out a pocket knife and carved a notch in my desk. I thought, "That's strange." And he said, "Didn't you see these notches on the desk?" and I said yes but I didn't know what they were. And he said, "This is how many records secretaries I have lost." (hoots!) He said, "Didn't you know that everybody knew that you and Joe were getting married?" And I said, (more laughter) "No. I thought we'd been very discreet." One of my younger brothers came down to spend the winter with me to learn Spanish, so I was well chaperoned.

As was customary then, the next big hurdle was that I had to resign. I wrote out a memo addressed to Cordell Hull, I went over it ten times: "Dear Sir: I have the honor to submit my resignation as such-and-such in the Foreign Service in order to marry Vice Consul ..... etc.," get this over with.

Q: I was going to ask you: when you went to Hamburg and were hired there, you were hired as a local, so you really had no status when you left. That was over, so that's why there was no continuation when you came back? But when you went to Mexico, you were Foreign Service Staff?

PALMER: Yes, briefly. Joe was Vice Consul, Unclassified C, that was the classification, you went from C to B to A to 8 to 7 to 6 to 5 to 4 to 3 to 2 to 1; no Career Minister was sent to Mexico. He went back to the Foreign Service School, and I stayed on briefly and

then went back to Savannah for three months to stay with my parents before our wedding. The Director of the Foreign Service was J. Clark Huddle, who had N-N-NO sense of humor!

Q: Was he the bachelor from New England?

PALMER: Yes! Yes! He and Cornelia Bassell -- (both laugh) Joe went through their office, and said -- of course, Miss Bassell was always right there -- " Mr. Huddle, I plan to be married sometime during this schooling and I need to know when it would be convenient." Huddle replied, "Mr. Palmer, this school is very serious, we have so much work to cover. As you know, we need five days a week and half a day on Saturday. I just don't see there's any time -- "And so Joe called me that night, and I said, (tones of outrage) "What do they mean there's no time to get married? You don't work on Sunday!"

Meanwhile, my mother needed to know because the engraved invitations had to come from Atlanta. We eventually opted for announcements. It was wartime. We had a small wedding, both families and close friends.

Q: Which was more seemly, I think.

PALMER: Oh, it seemed ostentatious to have a large wedding in 1941 -- I was married in a little church in Savannah with 80 to 100, it was small according to Savannah standards. Everybody was doing that in those days. Joe's family was in Boston, which could have been quite a logistical problem, We wrote both families the same day -- we sat down and wrote them saying we were going to be married, and we got identical letters back. His mother said, "Joe, with all the nice New England girls you know, a Southern girl?" (hearty laughter) And my family said, "We never realized you would marry a Yankee." (heartier laughter)

These were the days when families really checked up. They sent my married sister and her husband, my l2-year-old brother and a friend down to Mexico to "visit". And (laughing) you knew they'd come to check things out. Joe's family came down ostensibly to bring his sister Marjorie Shearer, who was engaged to be married to George Shearer, who was in the Foreign Service. (He died very young -- in his early 40s.) But they came down to check the situation out, and we weathered all that. In those days this was considered really a "mixed marriage." (both laughing)

So we were married on May 10, J. Clark Huddle called Joe beforehand and said, "Mr. Palmer, I've been thinking about this. I suppose you could be absent one Saturday morning." So Joe called me that night, and we rushed off the order to the engraver in Atlanta, made the reservations and did everything. He said, "I can come down and be there Saturday morning. We'll have to be married Saturday and come back Sunday."

Q: Yes, because you had to do this by train.

PALMER: We did. And he left the Foreign Service School and got on the night rain and came down. My father and brothers met him at the station, we got the license, rehearsed, were married, had the reception, got back on the seven o'clock train and came back to Washington. There was a note in our little apartment hotel from Mr. Huddle, saying, "Under the circumstances, we thought you should take Monday off." (explosion) That was his wedding present.

Q: How lovely!

PALMER: We were anxious to be married while Joe's school was still in session, so that we could know the people that we were going to go through the Service with. That worked out nicely, because we all had about two weeks together. We did some fairly nice bonding. There were only 17 members of the class, it was very small.

Q: Did Mr. Huddle actually look you over? I've been told that he looked over the wives --

PALMER: He was upset because he hadn't, you see? And before, he was in touch with Miss Bassell, and she said, "Well, I do know this" -- she probably would have said "girl" and not "woman" -- "I do know this girl because she had some friends in the last Foreign Service class, she knew the members of that group." Beyond that I didn't want to know what Miss Bassell said. She had her own list of people.

Q: That's what I wanted to ask you. Here she was, informally instructing young --

Yes! Some of the women adore her to this day. Miss Bassell just really took them by the hand and led them through their introduction to the Foreign Service.

PALMER: I think she probably objected to people who were a little more independent of that. I think so. Do you realize that "in those days" (we're talking about 1940). Not all girls worked. And I thought that being in the Foreign Service was a very nice job for a girl out of college to have. She had a list of people in Washington and in Boston and in Baltimore whom she introduced to the Vice Consuls, and had arranged many, many marriages. She was always very nice and sweet, she really was. Always when we came back I would go and call on Miss Bassell.

I didn't fit her -- you see, I had not made my debut because I was at the University of Georgia. My father said, "Do you want to come home and make your debut?" and I said "No thanks". And maybe that was being a renegade, but I really felt strongly; I could have, and a lot of my friends did, but they weren't doing anything else.

Q: But see, you were already married when you met Miss Bassell.

PALMER: No, no, I met her during the last class, before I went to Mexico, and I was working in the Department and was a good friend of Jane Wilson's who was editor of the

Foreign Service Journal. So through that I knew Miss Bassell fairly well. She was a formidable woman, but really in her way very sweet. I think that she felt that she had a mission to accomplish and she did a good job. She did marry off quite a few of the young FSO's.

Q: Well, from what I have read, the "old guard" in the Service, the 1920s establishment was very affluent. When the Rogers Act brought two Corps's together and they opened up the Service to young men like your husband, like Jacob Beam, like Kennan, Bohlen, Miss Bassell felt that they needed a wealthy debutante's income to get them through the Foreign Service.

PALMER: ...which was probably prudent! For years, they did marry money. We laugh about that

Q: I think maybe there were other compensations!

PALMER: But it's quite true. We took stock, and we had no idea where we were going, but we knew we were going to be married, and we were married. We came back and finished the Foreign Service School. When the day came for the postings, and one went to Brussels and one went to Montreal and one went to London and one went to something. And in the very middle there was somebody posted to "Nairobi." Joe called me up and I was ashamed to say I didn't know where it was. (both laugh) And he told me, and I thought, "That's fine, that's exciting."

We called both families, and both mothers burst into tears -- except for Joe's grandmother, who was in her 80s, and who said, "I feel quite safe, because, Joe, you do have an aunt whose family were missionaries in Southern Rhodesia and they were accustomed to entertaining Africans." (heartiest laughter) So then we had to wait, and wait, and wait for passage out there. We stayed in a place friend's house in Beltsville, New Jersey, and every morning we had to get up and drive over to the docks to check on our freighter's sailing date (maritime wartime secrecy involved).

Finally, after many false starts, on July 25 the families all came down to see us off, Joe's father took him aside and said, "Now Joe, are you all right financially?" He said, "We're just fine, Dad, don't worry about a thing." And that boat sailed with us on it and we had $13 between us." Isn't that something?

Q: And you really shocked your world right over --

PALMER: We felt we were all right, we had our health, we had our education.

Q: ...and your jobs.

PALMER: We had our jobs -- his job, I didn't have one

Q: You didn't even know it, but you had one!

PALMER: ...and I thought, yes, most of the men we knew had married wives with money, but we thought why don't we see if it can be done. If it can't, all right, we can do something else, but let's just see if we can. Of course, by the time (it took us 67 days to get to Nairobi.) we sailed from New York and we had to sail so far down in the South Atlantic because the Zamzam (name of ship) had been sunk the week before, so shipping was going quite close to the Brazilian coastline. We sailed so far south that we had to steam north to Cape Town. And of course by the time we got there we'd had about 27 days with accumulated per diem, which was $2 a day -- that was a fortune, $2 each! We were able to get off and go to the finest restaurants and have a wonderful time!

So then we puddle-jumped up the coast of Africa. We got stuck for two weeks in the Durban roadstead. An Australian convoy came to take on water and let the boys go off and work off some steam. We rocked in that roadstead for two weeks. We stopped at all the little ports along the way -- in Zanzibar; finally ended up in Mombasa and took the train to Nairobi. And we thought, "We can do it."

Well, we arrived and the Consul General was E. Talbot Smith. He'd been there about three years, I think. His wife had left him and was living with somebody in the Foreign Service in Lourenço Marques. Well, when we got to Lourenço Marques, we were met by a woman who said "my name is Mrs. Talbot Smith and my husband is Consul in Nairobi. I thought, now the only thing we knew about East Africa was what I'd been able to find out in the DC Public Library, and those were Martin and Osa Johnson books. There was nothing written –

Q: When did Isak Dinesen write her book?

PALMER: I'm not sure when they were written but they were about an earlier time. Then we arrived in Nairobi and were met by the Consul. This was a Friday, and he said, "I'm leaving Sunday." We had one day for him to hand the reins to Joe. Joe was 26 and I was 24. The Consul said, "Joe, your Consular district -- and I'm going to use their maiden names -- is Keen-ya, you didn't say Kenn-ya in those days, Uganda, Tanganyika, Zanzibar, Somalia, the lower part of Sudan, The Seychelles and Madagascar. That's what you will cover. Maybe because we were young --

Q: Sounded marvelous, didn't it? All those wonderful trips we're going to have!

PALMER: Sure, only there were no travel expenses, and Mr. Smith arranged to have a party for us on Sunday and introduced us to everybody in Nairobi. I put on my navy blue dress with the white collar, and hat, and gloves... And of course Nairobi was a wide-open frontier town and everybody was in various states of undress, so I immediately took off the gloves and hat and I tried desperately to blend in and sort people out. "This is the governor-general over there?" and "that's Lady Moore?" and this is the Secretary?" The answers came "Oh no, is with her, his wife is living with this one over here?"

We came home and cried that night. I thought, "Joe and I will never keep this straight." And some young blade who had had too much to drink sidled up and said, "How long have you been married?" We said, "I guess it's two months." He said, "I'll give you six months and you'll be out of here." And of course that made us even more determined. "No we won't, we thought. We WON'T be like this." Those were the "happy valley" days and all the young sons from Great Britain who didn't quite conform came out, and they had a ball.

Q: Remittance men.

PALMER: Yes, there was always something exciting. And it was here that one colorful took his little plane and filled it up with large rocks and bombed his wife's paramour who was escaping to the coast on the Mombasa road. (breakdown, laughter) It read like a novel. It was a wonderful time. We had four years there. I don't know what the high points of that are in between. We did have a gas ration, and we did cover everything we possibly could.

One particularly interesting episode I remember was that we had been in Zanzibar, which by the way is a most delightful -- and smells like a Virginia ham, so many cloves all over the place. The economy was very depressed there, nobody was buying cloves. And Joe found out that there were certain wartime guns that need a special oil that could only be derived from cloves. He went down to Mombasa and caught a little dhow and went over to Zanzibar and went to the authorities there and was able to unearth thousands and thousands of pounds of cloves that had been sitting there since -- I don't know -- Of course he became a hero overnight and later was decorated by the Sultan of Zanzibar. Ummmmm!

Q: At the age of 26 that's pretty heavy stuff.

PALMER: I guess he was 27, the year of maturity. And we went all over, as far as we could. I was not allowed up in the northern regions at all and Joe would have to go by military convoy. So we did this for two years. Then we had a Consul who was assigned over us. It was fun to have some help but sort of a comedown. Our first son was born there. He was the first baby born of two American parents in the whole of East Africa. Missionaries always went "out" to have their children.

Q: Did you have a midwife or was there an acceptable hospital in Nairobi?

PALMER: There was the Maia Carberry Nursing Home and there was the typical British delivery, you know, no nonsense. And after it was all over, "Would you like a cup of tea?" And I thought, "Dear Lord" (laughter) (inaudible sentence) I didn't have my mother on hand, I didn't have anybody to tell me what was going to happen. Unfortunately none of the wives worked, except we worked in the Kenya Women's Emergency Organization and we packed comforts for the troops and knit socks and that kind of thing for the War.

Q: How many American women were in Nairobi at that point?

PALMER: The wife of the Brigadier General of the East African Command -- he was British, she was an American; the Singer Sewing Machine couples were there; another couple who were importers/exporters.

Q: And you were the American Consulate until the second person came.

PALMER: There were only four of us. Not enough to make a club. So you made your friends. There was no inter-social contact with any of the Africans. As a matter of fact we were criticized for inviting local Indian businessman and wives.

Q: I was just going to say, your friends must have been British and --

PALMER: Oh, it was very British, it was very colonial. I'm glad that since I didn't start the colonial system, I'm awfully glad to have been a part of that. It's a very, very comfortable existence --

Q: That was.

PALMER: -- that was. Good servants, beautiful house which belonged to a white hunter who had gone down to the Coast to open a fishing camp, and we were in this marvelous house with a cook and a cook's helper and three garden boys and a "toto," a "head boy" who did everything -- we were living in style.

Q: For, what -- a salary of about $2,000 a year?

PALMER: The cook was the most important, therefore he was paid the most and he had 28 shillings a month. Disgraceful to think of. I didn't have any problem with the help because I'd been raised around blacks in Georgia.

Q: I think if you translated that into today's buying power, it's not quite as modest as it sounds.

PALMER: No, because we could take -- when we first arrived, we had been placed in the Norfolk Hotel, which is still there, a big colonial hotel, and Joe was making $256 a month and for $250 a month we had a room and a sitting room and a veranda and full pension. I said to Joe, "That leaves us $6 to buy gas and toothpaste and anything else that might come up." So we thought we'd better get out real fast and do something; so we found this house that belonged to an American white hunter, Al Kline, who was very famous back then, he took a lot of safaris up-country; they gave us their house for very little. It was within our allowance. And there again, we agreed "Well, we can make it through this." It was a very happy life. Nairobi is right almost on the Equator, wonderful climate but we didn't have a rainy season. For the ten years we were there, it didn't rain.

Q: I remember arriving in Nairobi from Amsterdam on a morning with a blue sky and the little puffy clouds that never seemed to obliterate the sun --

PALMER: Never did.

Q: -- and the bougainvillea.

PALMER: Wasn't it gorgeous?

Q: Oh! absolutely wonderful. And I really thought this is a place I'd like to be assigned, and (laughing) we never were.

PALMER: It was our first post and I'll never forget what it was like. Our house was the envy of everybody, the grounds sloped down to a small river, and on the sides of the river were vegetable gardens in which the garden boys planted year round crops -- we never had to buy vegetables. Food was very difficult, everything was rationed -- wheat, sugar, meat, etc., were rationed. There was a U.S. wheat project in Tanganyika, they were trying to find out if wheat would grow properly there, but it didn't get off the ground while we were there. We had bread rations, sugar rations, wheat rations. They killed the meat about 4:30 a.m. and hung it onto hooks. It dripped onto the sawdust! You went in twice a week and said, "Could I have my ration?" They just took a big butcher knife and would go down the sides, there were no cuts, we didn't have roasts and things like that. Periodically, the beef had "measles," so the butcher taught me how to remove the measles from meat.

Q: Oooh! What about milk for babies?

PALMER: Milk was difficult. We had to send one of the houseboys two miles out into the country every day to bring home a can of milk, which then had to be properly sterilized. Three years into our stay there the North African campaign was going bad, Rommel was just screeching across the north and the U.S., and Britain too, decided they'd better build an alternative air route. They put in a southern trade route, which had big airstrips, although no airport. That brought in a totally black engineering group down there, which threw us into a quandary. "What are we going to do with 60 American blacks?" In this place where blacks weren't even allowed to walk on the sidewalks? That was hard -- to set up housing and recreation in particular. The recreation ended up at Vice Consul Palmer's house. Every Sunday night we had waffles, thousands of waffles!

Q: At any rate, you had these black engineers --

PALMER: They took care of maintaining the airstrips. They were so homesick.

Q: Did they send these people down with supplies --

PALMER: They sent them with a certain amount of supplies, other things came over from Accra on C-37s. I was very pregnant with our first child and they said, "What do you miss most?" And I said, "I would die for a Coca Cola," and I said, "and I've run out of bobby pins." Isn't it funny, the little things you want when you're pregnant? So one day Joe got a call at the office and the caller said, "The C-37 is in with some supplies for the men, there's something for your wife on board but you'd better come quick and get it." So he went out, and on the plane was a barrel this tall of Coca Cola syrup!

Q: Oh nooooooo!

PALMER: -- and the bunghole had come loose, [both break down in laughter] so there was Coca Cola syrup all over the plane.

Q: -- and you had this much coke --

PALMER: Joe called me and he said, "Quick! Line up all the bottles and mayonnaise jars that you can, because I'm bringing a surprise." I couldn't imagine! Of course, we shared it with the few Americans there. Every night at sundown it was wonderful to sit down and drink the drink from home. I built up to having double and triple cokes with spritzes of soda. (hearty laughter). And I got the bobby pins.

Speaking of "Jaws," on the way up by ship in Durban one of the holds was broken into and vandalized. It happened to be a shipment of nylons that was going up to Asmara, of all places, so the captain said, "once a shipment has been vandalized like that, we have to make ... We were only twelve passengers on the ship and he said, "Go down and see if there's anything you can use." Well, most were size 14 and 16, I don't know where they were going, maybe to the Watusi tribe?

But you know, you couldn't get down those stairs fast enough! I had about 20 pairs of 9-1/2 and 10s. I kept them in glass mason jars to protect against silverfish. They lasted four years

Q: Wonderful gifts to give to friends.

PALMER: Yes. We loved the British, and I always felt a little uneasy, thinking we should be able to make friends with the Africans. But there was no level that we had. It was really against the law to teach them English, so we learned Swahili, a very bastardized kitchen Swahili. It was a very colonial atmosphere.

Q: Before your first child was born, how did you spend your days? I always remember at every post there was the excitement -- you got there, you got your house, the things arrived. And then suddenly there was the day you woke up and you realized you had to --

PALMER: I'll tell you exactly how I spent them. In a windowless crate that was about eight feet tall and about four feet square, behind a door with a lock. That was the "secure

area" in the Consulate. And since I had security clearance and Joe was the Vice Consul, I elected to pitch in and help.

Q: And he was there alone, essentially.

PALMER: He was there alone. There was no way he could have done all the coding and encoding. So there I was --

Q: So you kept your security clearance?

PALMER: Yes.

Q: And did you update it purposely or did you just happen to have it?

PALMER: Nobody ever asked. We had brought out from the State Department a brown paper package tied up with string -- it sounds like a song! And they said, "Guard these with your life." Well, we took this very seriously because they were privileged. We slept with them, we carried them every place we went until we got on board the ship and then we put them in the ship's safe. And we corded them up and slept with them on the train like this, they were our honeymoon bedfellows, those code books. When we arrived in Nairobi, E. Talbot Smith said, "They're out of date" (explosion of laughter)

They sent out an absolutely terribly system called "the strip code." They were long strips of very bendable paper, they were really almost like this, and a big board that you had to slide things in until it absolutely fit. And there was no way Joe could have done all the work he had -- he had a British secretary, there were no Africans except runners to the post office. I would go down and do the codes. And that kept me very busy.

Q: Of course it did.

PALMER: Of course when the new Consul came they found an American woman who was married to a British member of the military but they wouldn't give her security clearance, so Joe did a lot of the coding. I did volunteer work but mainly at the children's clinics and places like that. And the KWEO, the governor's wife ran the Kenya Women's Emergency Organization, and that was a great place to meet people and to spend a day -- we all worked on that.

Q: You said [in the bio-data] "wartime volunteer full-time."

PALMER: Yes, that was an all-day thing. Of course, when the baby was born, I took this very seriously, I wasn't about to turn him over to anybody, because infant health could be a problem. I had malaria -- counting the times in the States, nine times. I notice that Mrs. White said something in here some place about "tertiary malaria." I never heard anybody else say that.

Q: That they got on their trip?

PALMER: Yes. And although we took a prophylactic, I've forgotten what it was, I got it again and again. But then I had had it as a child. And do you know that that particular strain of malaria is so strong that -- it came out in London after our third child was born, in the hospital it popped out. And then another time when we were in Nigeria.

We had amebic dysentery just non-stop. There was no way to avoid that. You could be as careful with your water but you didn't live at home, you were out to other places.

Q: Well, that was quite an introduction, really. And when I think of young women going out today with allowances, with a ton of consumable food, with an Admin officer waiting there for them, a house picked out for them --

PALMER: Yes, most of that.

Q: - and then they go into the Embassy and work as switchboard operators and counsel --

PALMER: But we were on our own.

Q: You were on your own, and I think -- I really think people enjoyed it more that way than -- (she laughs)

PALMER: I wouldn't change it. We felt that we were contributing I was never bored, there was no time to be bored, there was always something to do. When we'd been there four years we talked about it one night, and Joe said, "You know, when do you think they're going to transfer us?" I said, "I think it's time you wrote back to ask." Harry Villard was on the African Desk. I said, "You know Harry." "Umm, vaguely. I came to know him rather late." I said, "Write Harry, and discreetly ask 'Does anybody remember that we're still out here'"? Now it's been four years." We had a two-year-old child, and both families were very anxious to get us back, to see us.

He did write, and we got a telegram right away. It's almost like they said, "Oh my stars, the Palmers, now let's see, the Palmers are STILL THERE." (both break up) They assigned Joe back to the Department. Joe was to go via Ethiopia and he was supposed to go to Asmara and to Cairo for consultations along the way. And on second thought, almost, "you can just do the best you can with your wife and child."

Nobody wanted to take us! No ship would take us, there were no airplanes, no flights coming in.

Q: Was the War over?

PALMER: No. (overlapping voices) I said, "This is fine, you go back to Washington and

I'll still be in Nairobi!" Finally we complained a little bit and all those waffles paid off, because the military said, "Now, enough of this nonsense, we will get you back." They did; they established a priority which was absolutely the lowest of the low, but they said that if I would take my chances and go back on a C-37 transport that I could take the child, provided I would put on trousers.

In those days women didn't really wear pants, so I went down to an Indian tentmaker and had a pair of slacks made. I was allowed one suitcase, and I had in a string bag a ceramic potty, made for the baby, and also in the bag a body leash I had made for him, a little harness. Actually, I didn't know what I was getting into. Well, we started out, and ten days later we got home. And I had not changed clothes -- it was just an ABSOLUTE nightmare.

Q: Would you fly a bit and then you'd be bumped?

PALMER: I would be bumped, fly a little bit and be bumped.

Q: -- never wanted to leave the airport because you never knew --

PALMER: Yes. And you sat, and this little thing looked at me, like, "Mother, you took me out of that beautiful garden, where my ayah brought me my juice every morning at ten on the nose, and -- what are we doing here?" He was two. And we'd get on these planes, bucket seats along the sides, and they were not pressurized. We would be sitting up front, and he would say, "Mommy, could I have some water," and I'd give him water, and ten minutes later, "Mommy, I have to teetee." Eventually, the men would just hand him all the way down to this big can in the back of the plane and let him go. (long hearty laughter)

Q: How nice, though!

PALMER: We got to Maiduguri. I looked on the map and thought we're not too far from Accra, which was the big staging area in those days. But we had a crash takeoff in Maiduguri, and I really wondered if I could get back on the plane. But I had to, you can't stay in Maiduguri. The temperature was 110. We got to Accra and ran into one of my waffle-eaters, as I used to call them, and I said, "Red, is there ANYONE who can pull any strings to get me with this child any place?"

He said he was leaving the next morning to go to Asunción, to Brazil and up, and he said, "I'll see what I can do. Stay in the Red Cross hut and if you wake up in the morning at the normal time, you'll know I was not able to get you on. If somebody wakes you up at four, get up quickly" -- you had to sleep in your clothes anyway, you were always ready to go. So I woke up the next morning and he had not waked me up. And I thought, well, that fell through. That plane crashed in Asunción, and everybody was killed. When Joe heard about this, he was in Ethiopia and went to pieces thinking I was on it.

Well, we finally got out of Accra and went to Brazil. I never knew when I was going to get on the next stage of any flight, all I had was this child on a harness, plus a ceramic pot and a suitcase. And that was a big post.

Q: Where did you go to in Brazil? To the northeast, to Recife, Natal?

PALMER: To Natal. Natal was a huge area, they said I would have to report to some place that was two miles away. I took this little baby on leash and the suitcase, which was getting heavier and heavier although I didn't have too much in it, and I flagged down a jeep with two teenager airmen in it -- you know, the very young kind with feet propped on the side and they said, "Lady, we can't take civilians" and I said, "Yes you can, too, you can take me." They did. They drove me down to the staging area.

By then young Joe was running a temperature, and I thought, "This is just one more hitch -- I've got to get some help." Someone took me to the medical unit and I walked in, and this voice said, "Jonesy," (which was my high school name), "Jonesy, WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?" It was a high school friend who had gone on to Yale Medical School and was in the Medical corps.

Q: For heavens sake --

PALMER: And I said, "Really God is good." So he dosed him up with an antibiotic and went down and sat with me and saw that I got on the next plane. We were dumped for everybody, we had really no priority. We went from Natal to Puerto Rico and over, and I've never been so glad to get to any place as Miami in my life. When we got there -- (Joe was another month, later he ended up in the hospital in Cairo with "broken-bone fever.") All my family -- brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends -- all went down to the train station to meet us and there was jubilation [with] everybody crying and laughing.

We stayed there for two weeks and then we took the train to Boston to meet his family. We went to Back Bay station and there were his mother and father and we got off and they said calmly and warmly, "Well, so this is our Grandson, nice to see you" and I thought, "What's the matter with these people?!" (great laughter) But they WERE warm, it's just a different way of expression.

Q: Attitude, yes. But what a -- I can't really say introduction because you had been in Hamburg and Mexico, but what an introduction of the spouse, really.

PALMER: Well, we still thought we could do it, we still could. Joe had always said, "My, I would love to buy you a fur," and I said, "I don't want a fur." "No, he'd insist. I want you to have a mink stole." And then it became a joke and he said, "If I ever get to be ambassador, I'm going to buy you a mink stole" and I said, "Fine, fine, fine .... We'll never do that." And it happened in Salisbury, Rhodesia. He'd been called back on consultation and one day a box arrived in the pouch. Young Tom was down with something, lying on the sofa, he said, "Mommy, there's a box from Daddy" and I said

"It's probably his shirts that he's mailed back to save luggage space. (laughter) So it sat around for a while, and he said, "Can I open it?" And I said, "yes." Then he said, "Mommy, this doesn't feel like shirts, it feels like fur." And out came this mink stole. And I thought, "No word in it, just the fur and a hidden message which told me he had been appointed Ambassador!

Q: That's when you went to Nigeria. Well, at least after Kenya you had three years in Washington, '45 to '48.

PALMER: Those were wonderful years because we again became the young married couple that we had started in.1941. We lived in Fairfax Park, Alexandria, which in those days was the mecca: we'd put our names down, it took us a year to get in.

Q: I think Tap and Margaret lived there.

PALMER: Dean and Virginia Rusk lived in the next building. We all shared the same laundry room. The Nixons lived there. And there were a lot of very interesting government workers and servants living there. We had a wonderful time in Fairfax Park, and had our only daughter, Heather there. Then we went from there to London.

Q: What was your husband doing in the Department at that point?

PALMER: He was under Harry Villard in the division of African Affairs. I think we both had pretty much decided if we had anything to do with it that Africa was the continent that he was going to specialize in. Of course, the "winds of change" had not touched it. Jomo Kenyatta was in Russia as a student when we were there. There were no little signs at all. But I said, "I don't know why people decide that they would like to specialize" -- in those days you could and you could stay, now you just can't, you're sort of on a track.

Q: Ghana was the first independent country, in '57, and we're back in the Department twelve years before that.

PALMER: That's right. Ethiopia was a kingdom, Morocco was a kingdom -- those were, if you count South Africa, the only three independent countries on the whole continent. And now there are 48?

Q: I don't know how many there are, they keep changing names -- there was a time when I could keep up with them but I really can't. I had to look up to make sure that Salisbury, Rhodesia was Harare, Zimbabwe. I always confuse Zambia and Zimbabwe and Zaire, even though we were in Africa.

PALMER: In London Joe went as Third Secretary and he became Second Secretary and he was still in charge of African Affairs, at the Political section there.

Q: And the Labour Party was in --

PALMER: Yes.

Q: -- and Churchill came back in while you were there?

PALMER: That's right.

Q: That probably didn't make much difference in your life.

PALMER: No but that was also a very interesting time. We were very happy in London. We served under four ambassadors there. And our third child, Tom was born, due to Anne Penfield -- a Foreign Service wife. Anne was one of those people who organize -- she woke up in the morning organizing people, and she had one little child with a nanny some place, we never saw her. Her husband was not Ambassador then but he was very high up in the Political section. Anne organized the Women's Speakers Bureau, and she loved nothing better than writing speeches. I found it absolutely the most awful punishment in the world.

Q: Oh really? Because you speak so naturally.

PALMER: Oh no. But these were the kinds of assignments where you went out into the countryside to small towns and spoke to women's clubs and you spent the weekend. Friday night was a tea and dinner and then you spoke and toured the town, and I had two small children and I found it really too much. And finally one night Joe said, "You've always said you wanted another child" and I said "I really do." And he said, "We're in London, everything's set up" -- he was really serious -- and he said "Let's have one here." And I said, "I can resign from the Speakers Bureau if I have a baby!" (both laughing)

Q: In those days they weren't going to send you out --

PALMER: You know, I really wasn't ever very "frail" but I said I [to the Speakers Bureau] "I just can't" -- playing your Southern lady to the hilt. (laughter) I try never to do that but I was really desperate.

I think one of the funniest things that happened in London was during the Suez Crisis, and Joe was very much involved in that. He was sent from the Embassy over to Number Ten Downing Street with a highly confidential memo. He was asked to come in and he realized that there was an emergency Cabinet meeting going on. So he backed up and they said, "No, no, no, no, Palmer, come on in." So he sat there and broke out in a cold perspiration. He said later to me, "You know, I was in the middle of a British Cabinet meeting. I had no business there at all!" Which was fun. We loved it.

Q: But how wonderful in his position, to then be able to take that back to the Embassy.

PALMER: Oh, yes. He remembers one night when he was on duty, and the code clerk

who was also on duty came in and said, “I have a message for Mr. Ringwalt” -- Art Ringwalt, who was in charge of Far Eastern Affairs in the Political section -- and the clerk said, “Poor Mr. Ringwalt, he’s so tired, I don’t know whether to wake him up or not.” And Joe said, “Well, look at it and decide is there anything Mr. Ringwalt can do about it tonight?” And she said, “No, I don’t really think so” and he said, “Well, then give it to him early in the morning.” Art’s phone rang up at seven in the morning: North Korea had invaded Korea, and she said, “But Mr. Ringwalt, there’s not a thing you could have done about it.” (long laughter) There was a great esprit de corps in London. It was a big post and everybody was working together. It was after the War, postwar, little hardships but nothing that you couldn’t --

Q: If I’m not mistaken, I think Arthur Ringwalt had been sent to that job to get him out of Washington, to get him away from Joseph McCarthy.

PALMER: That’s true, I remember that.

Q: His wife wrote her memoirs, it’s not very big, we do have those in our files. And there again I haven’t looked at them for years --

PALMER: It’s probably in them, that’s probably how I know. No two people have the same sense of humor, no two people find the same things funny. Joe and I always swore that when we finally retired we would write a book, “Mexico Side by Side,” “Nairobi Side by Side,” right down, because we realized we saw different things. He was very logical and precise, interested in what people knew and he knew all kinds of wonderful, wonderful information. He had a keen mind. I would see the people side of different things. It was almost as if we were in different posts. Isn’t that funny.

Q: Jean and Sheldon Vance have done just that.

PALMER: Have they really? Bless their hearts, I would love to see that.

Q: We have in our files her version, not his, but they have done that. But that’s what this project is all about, you see. Elizabeth White said, “I was always interested in the people. Pierpont was interested in policy.”

PALMER: She says there that she wasn’t interested in policy, and with her background and all of her thrust in life I would have thought she would be. Because I was very keen and always interested in the political side of everything. But I notice in there that she also told him never to tell her anything she shouldn’t know. I don’t know whether other wives did that but we did. Need to know: I didn’t really want to have anything that I didn’t need to know inside my head. Because after all, we were the ones that sat next to some of the most influential people, remember?

Q: Exactly, yes. You sat next to the Prime Minister or the President or the King or whatever. Of course.

PALMER: I can remember sitting next to Nubar Gulbenkian, who I think is the richest man in the world, and droning on and on about all these pedantic things, and when I found out who he was, I thought, "Well, really -- !" But sometimes you can't do your homework ahead of time.

Q: And how would you talk to him about money anyway? (laughter)

PALMER: (still laughing) Yes, our one thing in common was that we were both living in London.

Q: When I was trying to learn French in Morocco and because Guido was Economic Officer there I would have to go to these dinner parties, and I'd find myself at the right of some French man and the only thing I could think to talk to him about was money. And I didn't know anything about money. Talk about uphill situations! Where did you sit next to Gulbenkian?

PALMER: In London. We were beginning to climb the ladder then but never dreamed, you know. I think it was Class 4 we'd been in for years and years. They reorganized the Foreign Service, I've forgotten what year was

Q: Probably 1957.

PALMER: No, earlier because in the reorganization we still ended up Class 4! And I said, "Oh, no." I don't think either of us was terribly competitive, I mean, we used to know some couples that would sit down with a chart and chart everything out -- So-and-So made it, So-and-So didn't. But I found that truly depressing -- I really did

Q: I never read the promotions, I never read those.

PALMER: I don't remember reading them. I think Joe kept up with his Class.

Q: I think Guido would write the occasional note to a friend --

PALMER: Oh he always did the congratulatory note. And I think that he was kind of pleased -- he's kind of modest, he was kind of pleased that I think he was the first man in his Class that made ambassador.

Q: Oh of course he was pleased.

PALMER: And he was kind of young, he was 44, and in those days that was young. And we said, "Did we ever think --?" No! But you know, we didn't have an outside income, we never had any money handed to us for any reason, we never in all our years in the Foreign Service had anything catered. We had to do what we thought was the American way and we would include a lot of family. There were many, many inter-generational

affairs that went down well overseas. Especially in Africa -- I can't speak for all countries

Q: Brazil: very family oriented.

PALMER: Really?

Q: I didn't have any children there, but we would be included in their three and four generational dinners.

PALMER: I just thought that was very nice, and it was a little unusual the places that we went. I can remember the most glamorous party I think -- you know, you look back on parties, parties, and the Fourth of July I always felt worn out on the Fifth of July. Those were hard parties to put on, especially if you didn't have somebody to walk in and do it all for you. It was at a carol-sing and right before Joe came back to be Director General. In all the posts we were in, we always had a carol-sing for all the children, and that was inter-denominational too, we had Muslims and Catholics and Protestants, we had everybody. It worked, and the children adored it, the grownups loved it, and it was very Christmasy.

It's very hard to create Christmas in Africa, a tree doesn't look quite the same. We'd turn white posts into peppermint candy canes. We sent out 1,100 invitations to a carol-sing at the Residence. There with a big lawn that went right down to a lagoon. We went to the local beer company and got 1,100 beer mats and painted them red and stuck candles in them. Ah Nigeria! I have to say that Nigeria was our favorite post. For all kinds of reasons: it was hot, the climate was foul, it was noisy, it was raucous, people stole from you, they cheated you, to me it was the best post we ever had because the people were so yeasty. And the women in Nigeria are magnificent.

Q: How was it to go from colonial Kenya and Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia before it became Zimbabwe, to suddenly be in Lagos, where Africa, as you say --

PALMER: It absolutely rose up and hit you in the face in Rhodesia. They were beginning, they had -- what did they call it? -- they had this partnership when it was supposed to bring the blacks along. Well: it was our job, and Joe was Consul General, we implemented that policy. We went out and the first thing we did was invite the Africans who were in position into our home. And we were absolutely criticized for that on the side.

Q: Ian Smith was still in charge then?

PALMER: Yes. We had him. And when we had him we had some of the black members of the parliament. And some people would walk out, and some people wouldn't, it was a dicey time. It was their official policy.

Q: It was their official policy, and there you were as an American woman helping your

husband carry out American policy.

PALMER: We help, yes.

Q: Yes, with heart, we do help carry out policy, we don't make it, we implement it

PALMER: We implement it, we help carry it out.

Q: Right. And we have done that since Abigail Adams. And then for the Department to come on in 1972 and hand down that (laughing) foolish directive -- I've never gotten over it.

PALMER: We were in Tripoli when that thing came out, and I thought, "I'm glad we're almost out, I just don't think this time" -- And yet we had -- these people don't need to be named. Already there were wives who didn't want to do anything. They said, "I'm not going to do that."

Q: If you're nice to them they're nice to you.

PALMER: That directive was very bad and I know a lot of women stood up and cheered. And I thought, "That's sad. Because what else are they going to do?"

Q: That's exactly what my husband said. "What else would you have been doing (laughing) in Freetown, Sierra Leone?"

PALMER: Yes, what would you have been doing?

Q: I have no idea.

PALMER: First of all, I didn't play bridge. I have nothing against people who play bridge but I personally could not sit and play bridge all day. We've never even played golf, and we've never been bored, we've always found things to do. We had some things that bombed completely. I tried -- and this is really funny I tried to start a crossing guards program in Lagos, Nigeria. (both laughing) You know, there were children killed every day rushing across the street. I wrote the AAA and they sent me back this wonderful big kit on how you organize it in the schools and so forth. It was the biggest fiasco! They all wanted to be the chiefs (exploding laughter) everybody wanted to cross the street first, they all wanted the uniform of course

Q: And the belt --

PALMER: That fell. The other thing I tried in Rhodesia which bombed, I tried to do a PTA in a native school in Rhodesia. That was the funniest thing. All they wanted, the women would file in with the babies on their back and they'd say, "Where's the wool?" I didn't know what they meant, where's the wool. I found somebody to translate -- they

were so used to the British system that every time you got a group of what they called "the natives," the women in a room together, they handed out wool and the women would knit. They only came -- they weren't interested in (still laughing) the school or the kids, they wanted their free wool. So that didn't feed too well.

We tried a lot of things that didn't work. But we did start a major industry in Lagos with the women. The YWCA was having a big bazaar. Each country was going to be responsible for a booth. We wracked our brains, what can we do to sell and make money? We were down in the marketplace one day and there was a little man sitting hammering tin, and I said, "I bet he could hammer out one of these torches that people in the States use in their gardens." So I took him home, he looked at it and said yes he could do that. He called three hours later and said, "it is ready, Madame." So I went, and it was not a bad torch. I thought, with a pole and a wick -- nobody had them out there, except us, we had them at the Embassy and everybody used to think they were so glamorous at night.

So I said, "How many can we turn out?" He said, "How many do you want?" I said "dozens and dozens and dozens". So we sold these at the Bazaar, everybody loved them, and all of a sudden Lagos was ablaze with light (laughter) -- everybody was keeping torches. And Joe said, "This is wonderful, let's go back and ask him to make some for the next thing coming up," the National Organization of Women. But that's how we women filled our time. It was volunteer work but I don't think it was Mickey Mouse at all. I went down to re-order and someone said, "Oooh, he's not here any more." And I said, "Oh, what happened? Did he die??" And they said, "No-o-o, he make lots of money! (great laughs) He retired, he don't do nothing no more." Absolute mentality, if you don't need it why work?

We loved Sub-Sahara. North Africa was a big change for us.

Q: Well yes, because as you say everything was segregated and there couldn't have been too many Libyan women.

PALMER: No. And also, two days before we were supposed to go we had rented the house and were in a friend's house, and we had a phone call from our eldest son, who said, "Daddy, what are you going to do now that there's a revolution in Tripoli?" And Daddy said, "Oh, come on Joe." And he said, "No, there really was, there was a coup this morning." We didn't have the TV on. So Joe had to fly ahead and things were completely different. Libya had been economically viable and politically stable; we had a big Air Force base there with medical doctors and services; it was on the Mediterranean not far from Europe. This was to be our last post, and of course, we had to shift gears quickly. (laughter)

Qadhafi was very militant but no fool; people seemed to think he was, but he was not.

So that was I think probably the most difficult post. You could NOT get to know the Libyans. We went to one wedding that lasted three days, it took me about a week to

recuperate. And anybody that came to our house and accepted an invitation promptly disappeared. We were followed every place we went for three years by the same broken-down little VW with the same driver and passenger. I guess they thought they were being secret, but it was very hard to fight.

Q: And the Italian colonials were gone by the time you got there

PALMER: -- and, therefore, nothing worked, because the Italians were the artisans. The cars broke down, the plumbing broke, the electricity failed, etc. There was a small Diplomatic Corps. But that was not what we were used to. In Kenya we'd been used to knowing and working with the British and not with the people of the country, and I mean people from across the board. If you had children, you knew teachers; if you had animals, which we had thousands of, you knew vets; you knew the grocery store people; you knew a cross section and they seemed to have fun doing it and appreciate it. The butcher in Salisbury was one who became a great friend. He was the only ham operator in Rhodesia, and when the Congo crisis blew up and we had to get 180 American missionaries out of the Congo, the butcher came down and set up shop in the Consul General's house with his ham radio and we could get messages in and out. Not that you need people, you're not using them, but I just felt that they were "the people."

Q: But see, that was the difference in the Foreign Service in the 1920s and up till the 1930s.

PALMER: This was money --

Q: Of course -- it was" old" money.

PALMER: Ours was the generation where you -- and we were Depression children, I was born when things were, oh, very tough. I had always thought I would go where my mother went, which was Hollins [College] but by the time that came I was very grateful to go to the University of Georgia. And I'm not proud. It was a very leavening experience. But things had changed even then. If you wanted to do things, you didn't just depend on your aristocracy or your money.

Q: I used to think what if the rest of the world used to think of the United States when they saw -- we didn't travel in those days, only the wealthy traveled, there was no Peace Corps, there were no students with backpacks. Of course we were the only people that the rest of the world saw, by and large; and until the 1930s.

PALMER: Yes, because the 1930s came, and the 1940s, and we were the ones who took the baskets and went down to the markets and shopped for vegetables. Not because we needed to but --

Q: We wanted to.

PALMER: -- we wanted to, to find our favorite places. I still do, no matter where I am I still go to the markets. For two shillings you could fill up two great, enormous baskets of food.

Q: But in Libya -- your husband was there quite a while, four years. Were you there the whole time?

PALMER: Oh yes. And when it got to the point where anyone really was beginning to seethe underneath, we went to Malta for the weekend; that was the R&R spot. Everything was so dour in Libya. People went around like this, nobody ever smiled. They threw rocks at you, at the dog.

Q: We were just there briefly, on holiday two years before you went. But I remember walking almost alone through the -- I wanted to go down and see what the artisans' work was, because I had loved that in Morocco and Tunisia. And there were rugs made in Egypt, they were delighted to see me, but there was really no bustling --

PALMER: Not like Cairo.

Q: -- nothing like Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria. Even Algeria, war-torn as it was at that time.

PALMER: The Libyan is very, very serious. As Joe used to say -- Joe makes excuses for everybody in Africa, which is so -- well, they should be -- everything that's been done to them and all the times they've been run over and always been under the yoke of someone else. But now they're not under the yoke of anybody else, and I can't see that life has changed too much since we were there. It's still very, very dour.

Q: That's almost 20 years, too, that another generation has had a chance to grow up as a Libyan and not under Italian or --

PALMER: The only people we knew -- and this is terrible, I hate that -- were the families of the servants that were in the house. And every now and then, maybe twice a year, the driver would bring his wife and his nine children and it was so exciting to have them in the house. Of course they didn't speak any English but you got at least a look at a Libyan child and a Libyan wife! It was very hard there. I was not sorry to leave.

Q: Especially after Lagos, which must have been sort of -- well, you'd been in the Department quite a while, but even so Lagos must have been sort of the apex of all those years --

PALMER: It was.

Q: -- and to be able to open a post, too, not as an Embassy -- to be the first Ambassador, that had to be a thrill.

PALMER: That was a lot of fun! When we arrived there was a big old colonial house sitting on a lagoon and the doors were closed and there were dark green velvet drapes with gold fringe. And dark rugs, and dark, dark furniture. All the windows absolutely closed tight. Well, we arrived at the door and we ripped down the velvet draperies and opened the windows. Of course, Nigeria was very much in the picture at that point, we could have had within reason almost anything we wanted. FBO came out and sent the interior decorator and we did it all in primary colors --

Q: Which the Africans would love.

PALMER: -- absolutely gorgeous. And we put on a big new veranda and opened the place up. The head houseboy used to say, "Miz Emerson kept the do' closed," and I said, "The Palmers are going to keep the door open, people can come in any time they want to." And when we left, the doors closed again. Isn't that funny? It's just a different -- it's like when we went to Tripoli. The house had a cement fence all the way around. On the top was broken glass set into the cement. Joe looked at that and said, "My, that's a terrible sight to look at. Every day on the veranda to look up and see all that glass." So he got hold of the Admin people and said, "Please come right down and take that stuff down and smooth it off." So they came, and the workers said, "Well, some people likes it up, (she laughs) some people likes it down. You know, we puts glass up for some people and takes it down for the others." We liked to open this house.

Q: We'd gone ahead to Liberia but we didn't spent much time on Lagos. Looking at my notes, I'd like to get back to Hitler: I think it's interesting that you met him in such proximity --

PALMER: Actually I saw him about four times.

Q: He made such a tremendous impression on Elizabeth White [interviewed earlier] -- those eyes ... as she said, the irises weren't puckered, they were clear –

PALMER: They were sky-blue eyes... beautiful blue eyes. The first time I met him was in Heidelberg. He received me and an attorney in exchange for an interview. He became the interviewer, he took over the interview. When you're 20 years old, and you're interviewing Hitler, the Reichsführer, for the first time -- he asked questions mostly about the press in the States, why were they so anti-Germany and so-and-so things came out, I wasn't really prepared to answer all these questions. And I couldn't have asked him anything political anyway. The "School of Journalism" in Heidelberg was a misnomer, really, because there was no freedom of the press.

I took my degree in Journalism, which was journalism but mainly political science. They had a very strong faculty for that. But then you had to weed through all of their propaganda. It was a strange time. But the main point is that I learned German, because I had to, I had to take my exams in German. You couldn't do that by going around with the

few Americans that were there. One of the Americans who was doing his doctorate at that time was Charles Hulick, who became a Foreign Service Officer too.

That was the first time that I met Hitler and I came away absolutely dazed. I had been a member of the Hitler Youth. I'm glad I've never tried to run for political office! (hearty laughter) My German friends said, "If you're going to bicycle around, you really should join the Hitler Youth and take advantage of all the Hitler Jugendherberges (Hostels). I did labor camp for two weeks. But there again, that was getting to know German girls and what went on in their lives.

My sister -- my poor sister: she was always sent to find out why I wasn't coming home. (she laughs) She came over in 1938, that was when I said I wanted to stay on. She was married and she had a certain amount of money to put into a trip and our father would send me a check. I think he'd sold a story to the Saturday Evening Post and sent me the proceeds. And she said, all right, we can both go to Paris and spend a week and really live beautifully. OR, I said, we can go all over Europe on a motorbike, and I said [whispering] "What would Mother say?" and she said, "She doesn't need to know."

So we bought a Harley-Davidson, which we couldn't manage, the thing was huge, a great big red Harley-Davidson, we bought it third-hand." (laughter) So Charlie Hulick, who became the Foreign Service Officer later, said, "You girls can't go on a trip on that, I'll let you have my small bike" -- it was a Sach's Motor Rad -- it had a pinion seat on the back. "You can manage that," he said, "and I'll take your Harley while you're gone."

So we started out, and we did 2,100 miles all through Europe. We went across to Nuremberg, we went to Prague, to Vienna, to Budapest, we came down through Trieste and went through Italy and up through the Brenner Pass. We had a marvelous time, and we lived on apples and cheese and bread, and slept in youth hostels. So that was my last fling before I took the job in Hamburg and didn't have to settle down to "be a lady."

Q: But what a wonderful experience!

PALMER: Girls didn't do things like that.

Q: I was just going to say, you were light years ahead of your time, girls didn't do things like that.

PALMER: No, and it never occurred to me that we might have gotten into trouble, but we didn't. The only trouble we had, we were arrested in Czechoslovakia but that was for a very short period of time. We had a little tiny American flag on the front of the bike. We were going through places where not many tourists go and we were stopped on the side of the road. We both had American passports and I spoke German and they thought we looked suspicious enough to take us in. It didn't last and we didn't have to spend much time. But that's the way to see a country. I wouldn't take anything for it. Years later my mother and I were talking one day and she said, "You thought I didn't know you were

doing that." (hearty laughter)

Q: Mothers have a way of knowing, as you well know!

PALMER: "How did you find out?" So those were the days when people got out of college and took their summer abroad, and she said, "There were three young men in Savannah who reported back everything you ever did" -- (rest of sentence obscured by laughter)

Q: That would have been '38 (Palmer confirms). I think that's the year my sister-in-law went on a bicycle tour -

PALMER: We did a lot of biking too. The minute we got home we got rid of the motorcycle, that was not my favorite mode of transportation. In fact I lost my sister on one of the Italian Alps. It had some power but it wasn't a great big machine, and suddenly we going up the side of a steep hill and the machine took a big leap forward and I thought, "My goodness" and I heard my sister cry, "Margaret ---- !" and the whole seat fell off and she was on the side of the road. (both in gales)

Then we came back and washed all of our clothes and went to Paris and had a nice time, staying in a pension with some other students. Those were the days! But our mother always told us that we could do anything we set our mind to do. She was strict but she said, "Don't ever feel that you can't do anything" but she filled you so full of admonitions. "Now, you're going abroad, you've been down here in the South and you've been protected." And remember, in those days the colleges in the South, ten o'clock was curfew, and all the dormitories were segregated, and although I lived in the sorority house part of the time you were very strictly kept. And she said, "You are never, never, never, under any circumstances to ever go to a man's apartment." That opened up all kinds of vistas, I didn't know men invited women to their apartment. (gales again)

She tried to get me to promise that I would never drink. I said, "Mother, I'm not going to promise that, because I'm going to Germany where there's wine and there's beer and I'm going to sample everything. Don't make me promise that." So she did rescind that. But she always knew what we were doing, so I guess she was a big influence. Plus my father, who felt we could do anything too.

Q: What wonderful parents.

PALMER: Well, they had four of us -- five and the first one died -- and we've all compared notes since. They managed to make each one of us think, way down deep inside, that we really were the favorite. Isn't that amazing how people can do that? And they wanted us to get out and do things. They said they couldn't give us much but they could give us an education.

Q: That's the most important thing.

PALMER: Yes.

Q: When you went up to Hamburg, it must have been unusual for an American woman to have a position in the Consulate General -- they weren't sending staff abroad at that time, were they?

PALMER: No they weren't.

Q: How were you greeted?

PALMER: I was greeted by Allan Dawson. Wilbur Keblinger was the Consul General there and Allan Dawson interviewed me. He was sharp as a tack. He wanted to know what I was doing in Germany in the first place, and I told him I'd been on an exchange scholarship and that I had tried for an Humboldt Scholarship and had been turned down and that I wanted to stay. And he said, "Do you type?" and I said, "Oh yes." I didn't. (laughter) "Can you do filing?" and I said, "Oh yes." I had taken typing in journalism classes but I was not a 50-word-per-minute person and I didn't know anything about an office.

After we all got to know each other better, I said, "Allan, did you know all the things I couldn't do?" And he said, "Of course I did. (hearty laughter) Anybody with the guts to do what you'd done, I knew we could teach you." And they did. They put me outside on the switchboard the first day. It was one of these huge big PBX's and it was all in German but that didn't slay me. They liked an American girl on the reception desk -- there was a big American colony there -- and I stayed there about two months until I found out what was going on, what was coming in and out in various shipping. Then the visa department became so overrun that they put me back there, writing letters and interviewing people, which was very exciting. But I was the only American clerk there, all the rest were German.

Q: There was a Vice Consul and a Consul, Consul General?

PALMER: A Consul General and six Consuls, and a big Shipping division, an Economics section -- it was a sizable office. All the secretaries were German, who could speak English too. In fact I skated through the whole thing without learning to type or do shorthand. I thought if I learned, that's what I'd end up doing and I didn't want to do that.

The Department later sent me to Mexico thinking, I believe, that I was a lot more proficient in shorthand. I wrote my own letters but, you know, the dictators would sign off. Charlie Thayer was there. He had been Bullitt's private secretary.

Q: This was 1938-39? (Palmer confirms) George Kennan was also in Berlin then, and Marvin Patterson came the following year and married Jeff there in 1940.

PALMER: It was still small enough so that you knew the names of everybody.

Q: It was still a relatively small Foreign Service -- maybe 800, 900?

PALMER: Not more than that.

Q: And then you look at it today -- Well, everything has changed.

PALMER: Everything is done for you now.

Q: Yes. My husband always felt it was good for all of us to go out and find our own living quarters because you got to know people all along the way and the chances were that the person you rented your house from was some sort of power in the local society -- because they're the only ones that (she laughs) had the houses the Americans were renting.

PALMER: I think he's right. I think in the Foreign Service any place you can touch down, make a contact, helps. Just the fact that they're so interesting. (pause) Oh, I'd do it all over again. I think our worst time, my worst time, was when Joe was Assistant Secretary of State. I really thought that was a grueling time.

Q: Did you have a lot of demands made on you?

PALMER: Forty-eight countries, 48 independent countries, 48 National Days, 48 Prime Ministers who came to visit, 48 heads of banks they came in droves and droves and droves, and that was when the wives were supposed to do everything. I remember trying to weasel out, because I had three teenagers living at home. "Do I HAVE to go to this party?" Sometimes at night I would drive my car and park in the British Embassy parking lot, and Joe would come from the State Department, and we'd use one car and hit maybe three parties. In fact, one night I said, "You know, Joe, we've got too many to do down in the Kalorama section, let's meet at the first one, at the Shoreham Hotel, and leave one car in the garage and go on from there."

I met him in the lobby, we went down, we followed the crowd, we went down the receiving line and went through. And there was this big buffet and I said, "You know, I think it's really terrible that the Third World countries are spending this much money on lavish buffets." (explosions of laughter, this stage of story obscured) It was the Olive Growers Association of California! (gales) We sampled a couple of shrimp and came back out, and the host and hostess were standing there and they said, "Thank you so much for coming" and we said "Thank you for including us, we had a lovely time." We had a lot to go to.

And then the African women's organizations here are very, very powerful and I took part in everything that they did, and that included all the African Diplomatic Corps plus the prominent Negroes in this area, Afro-Americans. But to me it was split timing, those years when we had [she doesn't finish sentence]. He was Director General for two years,

that was very nice, that was very quiet. I think I was Honorary Vice President of AAFSW. We didn't have as many representational functions. In this tiny house, if you can believe it, with no dining room to speak of, our favorite thing to do was to take the Chiefs of Mission and their wives or whomever we had to entertain to high school football games -- either brunch and high school football, or come back for supper. We had to do things very simply, because I had no help, and they loved it.

Q: Well, it was what they were accustomed to.

PALMER: Not only that, they felt you were making an effort to make them part of your family. It might not have worked in Peru, it might not have worked in Rome, but we tried to do what worked for us, and hoped it did. This of course in this neighborhood at that time it created absolute panic -- black people parking their cars and coming in our house. So that took some getting used to.

Q: Was there any allowance for that representation?

PALMER: No.

Q: That was all out of your pocket. All those four years, out-of-pocket.

PALMER: Yes. Some things we did at Blair House, which was glamorous and gorgeous. Some things took place on the Eighth Floor in one of the little dining rooms but we didn't have to personally finance those. Anything else, we did. We couldn't have enormous cocktail parties but when our son got married we invited them all and opened it up and had them all in the back garden. We decided, as I told you earlier on, that we were going to have to do it the way we could. If it worked, fine. If it didn't, so what, we'd had fun along the way. We just "couldn't do it."

Q: But what a wonderfully unpretentious attitude -- that's the way it should be.

So really, in a way, from '65 to '73, those were your most demanding years -- you ended your career in your most difficult situations, as Assistant Secretary of State and Ambassador to Libya.

PALMER: Yes. Because all the things I enjoyed and had learned to do and thought I'd learned to enjoy with other women was absolutely inapplicable in Tripoli. I couldn't do anything. We had the Air Force base, which was my first experience of living near a base. That opened my eyes, that is a world unto itself. Talk about things being laid on and done for you! They got in touch with me about two months after we arrived and said, "The NCO wives had a tour bus to see Tripoli. It's only ten miles" and I said, "Why don't you get in your cars, drive down, come back for coffee, and we'll go down through the souk and to the old ancient quarters" and so forth. (with sharp intake of breath) "Ahhhh, we're not allowed to do that, that's too dangerous." So that was a very protected life. And they did not take kindly when the base was closed down. But the base was closed down, and

Joe had to do that. He negotiated with Qadhafi with machine guns on the table, with crowds outside (she imitates sound of guttural roars of a mob) and threats. It was unpleasant.

Q: This is quite a change of subject: the other day you told me you had submitted to the IRS some of your expenses in Tripoli, and they were not allowed.

PALMER: As I understood it then, this was to be a test case with the IRS -- whether some of the expenses that wives at a post have to bear would be allowable. I took this very literally, they said you're supposed to do this and I did it. I kept separately an account of all the times I had a women's luncheon, tea, other functions. We were supposed to have the right mix, so many of the host country -- you couldn't do that in Tripoli all the time -- so many of the Diplomatic Corps. Naturally I didn't give luncheons for the people in the Embassy, that was on our own, at least. And I documented names and times and what was served and the appropriate amount allowed per plate, and so forth.

It wasn't a vast amount but we were called in and told, "You're not supposed to do this." I said, "Well, I was told I should do it, put it in and see what happened." And they disallowed I think it was $l,800, as I say not a vast amount but when you add up that many little teas and that many luncheons over one year's time there, -- from '65 to when we were back here, during one of the four years that we were in Tripoli. They had said keep it for one year and see what happens. And they disallowed. I didn't argue but I wanted to explain. That didn't make any difference. "Your husband gets an allowance." But mostly anything there was either for the American community, or he had stag luncheons, a lot of stag affairs there. I imagine he did in Morocco too, wouldn't you?

Q: Oh yes, in Morocco it was always, if the women were invited, "Madame est fatiguée." There were more fatiguée women in Morocco, they just didn't come.

PALMER: The most "no-shows" we ever had was in Lagos. Either we would have no-shows or we would have people that came brought entire families. (laughter) We had a gorgeous dining room and we'd have it set for 18, all the little place-cards and flowers down the middle, and the head steward named Tom, he was so great, he'd come in and raise his eyebrows and there would be Chief So-and-So with his two brothers from the eastern region and two wives and some children. (laughter obscuring another sentence)

Another funny thing was sweet and I don't remember her name and I don't think it should go in a record like this, but Joe came home and he said, "The Nigerians have appointed their first Ambassador to the United States and I think we should have them out for luncheon." I said, "Fine, that's great, I can't wait to meet her." She was a very handsome and un-sophisticated woman. She came with a baby on her back and three little ones clinging to her knees. The cousin that usually comes to take care of the children squatted on the floor. So the baby was on the back and the little children in fold-up chairs -- you had to, what could you do, you make the best of the situation. And she was very shy and didn't quite know whether she was going to like this or not and I said, "You'll be just

fine, you really will."

So she went to the States. By then we had an Afro-American Women's Association who helped all these African wives settle in. They helped them find housing, helped them choose furniture, helped buy clothes for the children, tell them where to go to school -- that was really a good setup we had. Well, we came back a year and a half later and were invited to the Nigerian Embassy, and there was my little shy thing in a gorgeous French dress, charm in all directions, and she threw her arms around me and I felt like saying, "I'm so proud of you, you've done it!"

Q: A butterfly from a cute little cocoon.

PALMER: I think all Africans are sweet.

Q: We liked the Nigerians very much that we knew in Freetown. They and the Ghanaians seemed to have some of the more American-type get-up-and-go-isms, and the Nigerian women were matriarchal.

PALMER: Indeed they are, they hold the purse strings, they are the business people, and they all have their gold -- tons and tons of gold, and they have the beads, that's all they ever wanted to give years ago and I was never able to keep anything. The wife of the Sierra Leone president presented me at Blair House one day where I was having a luncheon in her honor, this matching set of earrings, necklace and bracelet. (It was later auctioned off, as all those things were.). And what did I have to give her? A book. That's embarrassing. I brought that up with Lady Bird Johnson. Two points, she said: What can the wife of the President do to make life easier for an American Ambassador's wife? And I said, One big thing: if she could possibly receive that woman before she goes out to her assigned country, so as least you could say, "I saw the President's wife week before last and she sent her best regards to you" and blah-blah-blah." It's something to build on. It's awfully hard to go out and not know your own country's President's wife (rest of sentence inaudible because of hum) Mrs. Kennedy wouldn't receive anybody. He was great. We all felt really a part of things.

Maybe that's another reason that Nigeria was fun -- it hosted the first Peace Corps that came through. Teddy Kennedy came out with that first group, not as Peace Corps but came out, looking very young. To us he epitomized the leadership that we felt at that particular point in our 40s -- that we could do it, and that America was just the best country in the world.

Q: When you were in Libya the '72 Directive went into effect. Did that really make any great earth-shaking difference in your life?

PALMER: It made no difference in my life in Libya, because we had started out with 110 people in the Embassy and the Libyans cut us down, cut us down and down until we were seven. The directive came out from the Department saying "all able-bodied Americans

are to be pressed into service within the Embassy." In Political -- any place -- and I thought, that's marvelous, at last I can do something except sit behind these walls. And I went down, as did the DCM's wife and their daughter was with us at that point, and everybody got a job except THE AMBASSADOR'S WIFE. I was upset -- I would have liked to do something, ANYTHING, but under those circumstances I was not supposed to work and I really was very bitter about that. And they said, "What you can do is open up a small commissary." (laughter) That's what you have in mind? I thought, "All right, if that's what needs to be done I'll do the commissary." So I opened one little room and would check out all the other wives who would come through and say, "Where can I put my burn bag while I'm shopping?" It's not fair, absolutely not fair.

Q: A young woman named Christine Shurtleff, who isn't really involved in the Oral History project but is vice president of AAFSW and attends our project's monthly meeting as liaison, whose husband must have been Ambassador to one of the African countries, recently published in the AAFSW News a proposal for spouse compensation.

PALMER: -- talking about that for years.

Q: Yes. And she, like you, was ticked off because now it isn't so much the money, it's the burn bag, there's no status --

PALMER: It's a funny little feeling. How would you like to put on an apron and check out somebody's bacon and beef from Emborg, Denmark, when one of the junior wives has got a burn bag and is up in the Political Section doing exciting things?

Q: Exactly. Finding out what makes the Embassy and the Foreign Service go around. And you shouldn't [have that feeling] but you do.

PALMER: You can't help it.

Q: And more and more of these young women who have had their careers --

PALMER: I didn't have a career but for that short time.

Q: No, but you got out and did things.

PALMER: Yes. And I resented -- it was lonely, it was very lonely.

Q: That's exactly what everyone said, too.

PALMER: You spend a lot of time waiting -- waiting in a car for your husband. So that was difficult. And that's one reason why we opted to take early retirement. My husband was only 59. He had been Director General and he said, "Margaret, we have done what we set out to do and had a wonderful time. Let's don't be the ones to hang around the State Department and ride up and down the elevators hoping for one last job." By then I

said, “I’m ready to go home and be a part of our children’s life again too.” Both of our mothers were still alive and I said, “They’re getting really elderly now.” So we left with no recriminations. We really were ready to go. I think we probably could have handled the jobs. We also weren’t too happy about the way things were going in the Presidential campaigns. We had reached the point it was time to go. It was time.

Q: I think you were very wise to recognize that.

PALMER: Joe said he had too many unhappy memories of people coming in who were at the end of their careers saying “surely there must be some place I can be assigned”. “And I advised them “get out, man, you’ve done what you set out to do.” Then he said, “In all honesty I couldn’t give that advice to other people and then not take it myself. There is a progression, there’s a time for these older men to get out so that career men can be pushed up from the bottom.” We’ve nurtured more Vice Consuls who have become Ambassadors, and you know we get so excited and write them letters. There was an old Ambassador, Ely Palmer, who was quite prominent in his days. When Joe made Ambassador Ely sent us the rest of his engraved invitations -- little things like that. There’s only one other Palmer I know of, Steve Palmer, maybe we could send him the rest of ours if he makes it. (laughter)

I can’t think of anything else .... It was all worth-while, we’d do it again in a minute. I’m not saying that our methods were the best --

Q: But they worked for you.

PALMER: They were fulfilling. And I think what we set out to do was be ourselves, and that I think we did many times.

Q: I can assure you that when we sat down and made out our first lists in 1956, your name was on -- (asks to look at Palmer’s scrapbooks, then comments on caption for photo of a dog, “The dog hadn’t had any meat, feeding him cornmeal”)

PALMER: First of all, we won the dog at a Red Cross raffle. He was a little ball of Fluff, so we named him Tuffy, and Tuffy grew into a Lion Dog, better known as a Rhodesian Ridgeback, a huge thing that ate everything in sight, he ate flowers, bougainvillea, you name it. Joe said, “We’ve got to feed this dog some meat.” With the meat ration we were barely getting along ourselves.

I said, “I’ll go down to the market and see, maybe Mr. Bischendas has something hidden away.” They were slaughtering camels that day and there was a camel drumstick, which is about six feet two. Then, (breakdown in laughter) having paid for the drumstick I was faced with how to get it home.

So Mr. Bischendas said, “Open the back of your rumble seat and we’ll put some newspapers in to catch the blood.” I drove through Nairobi with this grea-ea-eat big

camel drumstick, came to the Consulate, and beeped our signal for Joe to come down and drive home for luncheon. And he looked at me and said, "What in Heaven's name -- ?" and I said, "A camel's drumstick for the dog." We hacked it up and boiled it with cornmeal and had meat for days and days and days for the poor dog.

We had no fridge, we had no canned goods, no processed food of any kind, we ate from the local economy. We had to make our own saltines, we had to do everything from scratch. Which was fun to do. I still know how to make saltines.

Q: I'm impressed; I wouldn't know how to make saltines!

PALMER: Miss Bassell's back never touched her chair. She always paused -- long pauses between sentences, which could make you very nervous.

Q: And with her very ladylike southern accent. She was from West Virginia.

PALMER: She was the arbiter and all protocol, and no Vice Consul left there without the proper stationery, without the proper calling cards, without a wife who had been schooled in all the niceties, plus the book on protocol which I love. (some exchange about the Blue Book and who followed Miss B.)

During the time when Joe was Director General, in 1964, the Foreign Service Institute, Dorothy Stansbury used to have me come over and talk to the wives about protocol because I'd been an Ambassador's wife. Come to find out, she was telling them that all Ambassadors' wives don't bite, this was a normal one, just a plain one.

Q: I can believe it!

PALMER: So I used to go over and hand out the certificates and tell them to be themselves and tell them what to do, not what not to do. But I didn't realize that I was sort of paraded around as the one that didn't bite.

Q: In connection with the '72 directive, Dorothy Stansbury is interesting because in 1971, Bill Macomber was there and had his "Diplomacy for the '70s" and he pulled together Fortune's task forces and they looked at every issue in the Department except the spouse issue. Someone pointed this out to management, and at that point he went to Dorothy Stansbury, who was quite an ardent feminist, and said, "Dorothy, pull together some reform guidelines for Foreign Service wives."

PALMER: I think it should have had more balance than Dorothy's.

Q: Of course it should have. What came out of it, Dorothy got together a group of 27 women to comprise that task force. There wasn't a single name in that task force that you or I would recognize in the Department as being the influential wife of an Ambassador, no one influential in anything like ...

PALMER: Frankly, Jewell, they were ciphers.

Q: She just chose women from whom there would be no backlash, and she released to the Department something called "Guidelines for Wives" but they were not reform, they were the old-school stuff.

PALMER: I've got those upstairs.

Q: I have those too. And those were printed in the Department as Management Reform Bulletin No. 20. Articles began appearing in the Foreign Service Journal, very caustic about this; and a group of young wives and employees, also spouses who were working in the Department, went to Bill Macomber and said, "We can't have this, we want reform. Those guidelines caused a ferment among young Officers whose wives --

PALMER: It was a revolution.

Q: Yes. And the '72 Directive was written after this group of women went to Mildred Marcy, who took them up to Bill Macomber, who then sent them over to the Secretary's Open Forum panel.

PALMER: What part did Katie Loucheim play in all of this?

Q: None that I can see. She was there earlier; we're talking 1970.

PALMER: But Katie was not militant! I was in Tripoli when that came out, and I looked around at all these women in barakans with their eyes closed like this, and I said "I can't believe that they have done this."

Q: Well, these women and the Officers --

PALMER: "Buts" Macomber they used to call him. Bill Macomber -- it wasn't derogatory, he was called "Buts" Macomber and he was very stubborn. Very forceful, very stubborn. END OF THIS SIDE, A

BEGINNING SIDE B
Q: (in mid-sentence) -- young man then, Charlie Thomas, III, was chairman of the Open Forum panel and he wrote an objection to the directive before it was ever released.

PALMER: He did. I found that in my file the other day.

***

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Spouse: Joseph Palmer II

Spouse Entered Service: 1940 Left Service: 1973
You Entered Service: 1939 Left Service: 1941 and became "spouse of"

Status:
Father: Thomas R. Jones, was American Vice Consul General in Glasgow, Scotland, 1909-1911
I was FS Staff, Hamburg, Germany, Dept. of State and Mexico, DE before marriage to (now Ambassador Ret.) Joseph Palmer II in 1941

Posts:
Self:
1938-1938 Hamburg, Germany
1939-1940 Department of State, Washington, DC
1940-1941 Mexico, DF

As Spouse:
1941-1945 Nairobi, Kenya
1945-1948 Department of State, Washington, DC
1949-1953 London, England
1953-1958 Department of State, Washington, DC
1958-1959 Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (Consul General)
1960-1963 Lagos, Nigeria (AEP)
1963-1965 Department of State, Washington, DC (Director General)
1965-1969 Department of State, Washington, DC (Asst. Sec. State, AF)
1969-1973 Tripoli, Libya (AEP)

Spouse's Position: Career Minister Retired

Place/Date of birth: Oct. 4, 1916, Savannah, Georgia

Maiden Name: Margaret McCamy Jones

Parents:
Thomas R. Jones, Newspaper Editor, Author

Schools: Savannah High School, University of Georgia, Heidelberg University, Germany, Exchange Student, Senior Year

Date/Place of Marriage: May 10, 1941, Savannah, Georgia

Profession: SPOUSE OF

Children:

Joseph Woodbury Palmer
Heather Gordon Palmer Jafari
Thomas Jones Palmer

Volunteer and Paid Positions held:
At Post:
Kenya Women's Emergency Organization (wartime volunteer, full time); FS Clerk 1939-41; Speaker's Bureau, London Embassy; Brownie and Girl Scout Leader; Member International Council of Women, Nigeria; Board Nigerian YWCA, ETC! ETC!

B. In Washington, DC: Secretariat of 8th Scientific Congress, Washington, DC 1940; Program Chairman, AAFSW Luncheons; Co-Chair Book Fair; Honorary VP AAFSW; Publicity Chairman AAFSW Book Fair; Program Director, Foreign Student Service Council; Co/Chair FSSC Charity Fund Raiser; Executive VP FSSC.

End of interview