

Recollections of José Pearce de Azevedo

For 35 years the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office was able to rely on the complete discretion of their man in the Algarve, the charismatic Dr José Manuel Teixeira Gomes Pearce de Azevedo, OBE. Ten years after his retirement, and now aged 80, he has agreed to tell for the first time some of his hitherto confidential experiences.¹

By Len Port

What he has revealed here is unlikely to alarm Whitehall or be the envy of WikiLeaks, but nonetheless it is a fascinating and often amusing insight into the work of a man who was long the doyen of the Algarve consular corps. As such he rubbed shoulders with members of the British royal family, leading politicians, and assorted celebrities – as well as ordinary law-abiding expats and serious villains.



José Pearce de Azevedo

1965 at the age of 35. In 1974 he became full honorary consul. His wife, Zefita (pictured below with an orphaned child), officially joined him as pro-consul in 1983 and they served together in the consulate in Portimão until their retirement in 2000.

They were at the British Embassy in Lisbon together during a state visit by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II when the monarch left a crowded room to visit another part of the Embassy building. Joe recalled how Prince Philip then entered the room, glanced around, and caused great mirth among diplomatic staff by asking in a loud voice: “Has anyone seen my wife? Where is she?”

The ever gregarious and convivial 'Joe', as he has always been known to close friends and colleagues, had the advantage of a pedigree that made him eminently suitable for the job of representing Great Britain here. He was the grandson of Portimão-born Manuel Teixeira Gomes, who served for thirteen years as Portugal's Ambassador to London. As Portugal's first envoy in the UK after the abolition of the monarchy in this country, he presented his credentials to King George V in 1911. Teixeira Gomes went on to become the seventh President of the Republic from 1923 to 1925.

Both Joe's father and grandfather had served as vice-consuls in the Algarve. He followed in their footsteps by being appointed vice-consul in



Maria Josefa Pearce de Azevedo

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At another official function in the Embassy, the Prince of Wales and Princess of Wales questioned Joe about the tie he was wearing. It bore a crest featuring three white ostrich plumes, the emblem of Wales. There were two small initials below the plumes. Pointing to them, Joe told the bemused heir to the British throne: “Your Royal Highness, the C is for Charles and the D is for Diana.”



Joe with a picture of his grandfather, in Portimão museum

Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, came to the Algarve on a private holiday with her two young daughters the summer after she was famously photographed topless and having her toes sucked by a male American friend. Fergie, Beatrice and Eugenie stayed in a private villa near Lagos. At the end of their stay, paparazzi gathered at the front gates of the villa hoping to photograph the trio leaving, and then follow them to Faro Airport.

A car containing five people shot out of the gates and sped eastwards along the main road towards the airport. The Portimão police chief in full uniform was clearly visible in the front passenger seat, but the three people in the back were much less visible. With the paparazzi in hot pursuit, the get-away car kept going as far as the Penina Hotel on the outskirts of Portimão. There it turned sharply left and headed northwards along a minor road towards the hills. The paparazzi duly swung left and followed. Ten minutes after the first car and the paparazzi had left the villa, a second car departed rather more sedately. With Fergie and her two daughters at ease in the back seat, this second car drove all the way along the main road to Faro Airport without anyone taking the slightest interest. The three people in the back seat of the first car were police officers. The driver, the man who had devised the successful ruse, was none other than Dr José Pearce de Azevedo, OBE.

The OBE was awarded in 1977, though Joe was not quite sure then what he had done to merit it. He still isn't – though he suspects it had to do with his consular work in the aftermath of the 1974 Portuguese Revolution. This, admits Joe, was the most difficult period of his tenure as consul.

Some worried British expatriates withdrew from the Algarve, at least temporarily, during the turbulent post-revolution period. Among them was the golf legend, Sir Henry Cotton, a close friend and frequent golfing partner of Joe's. To help allay feelings of insecurity among those who stayed, Joe set up an information network by dividing the region into six areas and appointing a prominent expat in each to liaise with the consulate in Portimão. Joe knew key officials such as Major Branco, head of the military forces in the Algarve. He was thus able to brief and relay

information between administrators and the British community, whom he liked to refer to as his 'parishioners'.

During this period, Joe had several meetings with the British Ambassador, Sir Nigel Trench. One day Sir Nigel mentioned that when he was appointed ambassador to Lisbon people remarked about how lucky he was because Portugal was the right place to retire to. "The revolution broke out as soon as I arrived. It couldn't be any better!" declared Sir Nigel.



'Joe' with President Mario Soares

Always a busy man, in addition to working for the Foreign & Commonwealth Office Joe served as the first President of the Algarve Tourist Board. He was also head of the Portimão port authority. Not only did all this demand long hours in the office, it also involved frequent working lunches, cocktail parties and dinners. On one such occasion, Joe was able to informally introduce Jack Eden, the British Consul in Lisbon, to the then iconic President of the Portuguese Republic, Mário Soares. It wasn't a formal official occasion; the consuls and the president just happened to be eating in the same restaurant at the time. On meeting Jack Eden again a few days later, Joe held out his hand but Jack refused to shake it saying: "I haven't washed my hand since meeting the President!"

Joe was on close terms and went out of his way to give personal help to visiting politicians, including the likes of Sir Geoffrey Howe, Margaret Thatcher's longest-serving cabinet minister, and Duncan Sandys, later Baron Duncan-Sandys, a minister in successive Conservative governments and sometime son-in-law of Sir Winston Churchill.

Another top Thatcherite politician and his wife, whom Joe declined to name, visited the Algarve but were not in their villa when he arrived to greet them and give them a box of *Dom Rodrigo* cakes, a delicious Algarvian confection. The only person on the property was the gardener, so Joe gave the gift to him, asking him to pass it on to the 'lady of the house' and say it was from the British Consul. The 'lady of the house' must have been well pleased because Joe had gone to the wrong address.

On meeting the top Thatcherite the following day, the politician pompously told Joe that he should be 'more careful' about the address because he did not want people to know his whereabouts. Joe was able to point out that he had gone to the wrong address because it had been incorrectly communicated by the politician's own office in London. Some days later the same MP phoned Joe to say a red briefcase full of documents had been stolen from his holiday villa. Joe set

in motion steps to find it. He was successful. The briefcase had been broken into, but it was returned to its owner - with a rope around it to stop the contents falling out.

After paying a courtesy call to a Chief Whip of the Labour party who was staying at a top Algarve hotel, Joe asked the politician if he wanted any message passed on to a visiting Tory cabinet minister with whom Joe was having dinner in a somewhat less salubrious hotel that evening. “Consul, please convey my good wishes to the minister, but not my affection,” said the Labour man. When Joe did so, the Tory asked which hotel the other was staying in. On being told, the minister remarked: “Always the same; Labour in five-star hotels, Conservatives in four.”



Joe was asked by another unnamed MP to persuade apathetic local authorities to connect his villa near Cape St. Vincent to mains electricity and water supplies and install a phone line. “I promised to do my best but said nothing was assured as I wasn't God,” Anyway, strings were pulled and the connections were made with such speed and efficiency that the MP felt moved to tell Joe in a letter that he may not be divine, but his influence had been miraculous, on a par with Moses' role in the parting of the Red Sea. The MP said Joe had made it possible for him to “toast my loaves and grill my fishes.” In gratitude he promised to be Joe's “evangelist” in parliament in London. Later, when Joe wrote asking for specialist advice on a certain matter, the “evangelist” didn't even send “Moses” a reply acknowledging receipt of his letter.

Cherie Blair, on the other hand, sent Joe not only a kindly worded letter, but also a photograph of the whole family standing outside No. 10 Downing Street immediately after husband Tony's victory in the 2001 British general election. It was by way of appreciation for a small gift and a helping hand on meeting her with baby Leo in her arms at Faro Airport at the start of a holiday visit staying at Sir Cliff Richard's home near Guia.



The Blair family photograph

Many years earlier, when Joe first encountered Cliff, the pop singer was famous but still young and unknighthooded. He owned a holiday home in Albufeira close to the town's cemetery. The location ensured peace and quiet. Rumours began circulating that the town hall authorities were planning to re-site the cemetery and replace it with a tourist complex. Cliff told Joe that if that happened, he would leave Albufeira.

It didn't happen and some years later Joe was on hand when the municipality honoured Sir Cliff by naming a street after him. When Sir Cliff was unable to attend a ceremony in the Algarve at which the Portuguese government awarded him a gold medal for his contribution to the country's tourist industry, Joe picked up the medal, along with a similar one for himself. He and Ambassador Roger Westbrook later presented Cliff with the medal in his new house near Guia.

In his early years working for the FCO, Joe was a Lloyds insurance agent. As such he was asked to do a survey of furniture belonging to a small, elderly woman called Mrs Grant, who had a home on the outskirts of Lagos. After finishing his assessment, Joe said to this seemingly vulnerable little lady: "As British Consul may I give you a bit of advice? I believe it would be safer for you if you moved closer to Lagos." She looked him in the eye and said sternly: "If you knew who I was, where I have been and what I have done, you wouldn't dare to say that young man!"

The formidable Mrs Nellie Grant had been a pioneer settler in British East Africa. Joe met her again at a dinner party organised by a consulate colleague, Donald Armstrong, another ex-Kenyan colonial. Among the guests was Mrs Grant's daughter, Elspeth Huxley, who contributed much to the dinner table conversation. A polymath, broadcaster, journalist, author, conservationist, political thinker, magistrate and government adviser, Elspeth had been brought up in Kenya and had written many fine books on colonial Africa, including *The Flame Trees of Thika*. She was a friend of Joy Adamson, who wrote *Born Free* and an acquaintance of Karen Blixen, author of *Out of Africa*. At the dinner - now that he was in the know - Joe and Nellie got on just fine.



Elspeth Huxley

Joe quietly used his good offices to further ecumenism by introducing John Satterthwaite, Anglican Bishop of Fulham and Gibraltar, to Júlio Tavares Rebimbras, Bishop of Faro, and liaised

in discussions on the shared use of Algarve churches. Although he mixed a lot with the great and the good, he had a down-to-earth view of his role. “As consul I thought I had to help citizens whenever they needed help, even with matters which at first sight did not seem to be the consul's responsibility.” To this end he was able to call on an array of private as well as official contacts.

Consular work brought Joe into direct contact with British citizens accused of committing serious crimes in the Algarve. He attended trials to see that justice was being done. From the public benches during a trial in a courtroom in Faro he respectfully interrupted proceedings on seeing that the defendant's official interpreter was a policeman. The presiding judge agreed but said the court had been unable to find an alternative. The judge welcomed Joe's offer to produce a suitably qualified person, which he did by immediately enlisting his private secretary at the tourist board office in Faro.

His stature among the legal profession was such that the presiding judge in a much-publicised grievous bodily harm case in Albufeira told Joe of the 'not-guilty' verdict over lunch before announcing it in court. Another judge in a murder case confided later that he sometimes wondered whether the tribunal's guilty verdict had been the right one.

Following the crash-landing of a Dutch DC-10 in severe weather conditions at Faro Airport in 1992, Joe went to the airport both as Consul and as President of the Algarve Tourist Board. Fifty-four of the 327 passengers and two crew members died and 106 people were badly injured in the crash. Nearly all were Dutch holidaymakers. Three of the passengers who had escaped injury had English-sounding names. They had been seen leaving the airport but their whereabouts was not known. Joe tracked them down to the Eva Hotel in the centre of Faro and found them in the bar. Never one to turn down a drink, Joe accepted their invitation to join them in celebrating their survival.

Having witnessed the bravery and skill of the emergency services fighting forest fires and rescuing people in the Monchique hills where many Britons had homes, Joe suggested to the Embassy that it would be appropriate to donate life-saving defibrillators to the *Bombeiros* fire and ambulance volunteers. The Embassy agreed and Joe later handed them over to the *Bombeiros* stations in Lagoa, Monchique and Portimão.

It was his quiet and genuine concern for ordinary citizens that distinguished him as a representative of the British government and why he was so well-known and held in high esteem. During a holiday visit to London, he was watching the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace when, to his astonishment, a guardsman asked him in perfect Portuguese: “Are you Dr Azevedo, the British consul in the Algarve?” It turned out that the British guardsman had mastered the Portuguese language while working at the Dona Filipa Hotel at Vale do Lobo.



His 'parishioners' were a diverse lot, of course. The first customer to come into the consulate in Portimão after it opened in 1965 was a Scot. When it came to signing a document confirming he was a British citizen, he refused to do so on the grounds that by declaring himself 'British', some might think of him as English rather than Scottish.

In his various roles, particularly his long involvement in the British-Portuguese Chamber of Commerce - a branch of which he helped establish in the Algarve - Joe was an honest broker in promoting business, along with such people as his long-standing friend, John Stilwell, chairman of the Chamber and founder of the venerable Penina Hotel near Portimão.

He is proud to be a vice-president of the Anglo-British Society in London, a long-time member of the Royal British Club in Lisbon, honorary president of the 41 Club in the Algarve, and the holder of card number four issued by the Association of Foreign Property Owners in Portugal. More than anyone, he has bridged the cultural gap between Portuguese and British people in the Algarve and further afield, mindful of his favourite motto, “may the hinges of friendship never rust”.

Joe has continuing respect for other retired consular colleagues such as Ron Underwood who still lives in Portimão, but the key figure throughout his long and distinguished career has undoubtedly been the person he calls his “Field Marshal”. The indomitable Zefita has been his devoted wife, wise counsellor, and steadfast partner through the “good days and the bad days” for the past 53 years.



Joe and Zefita

Who knows, Zefita's memoirs may one day add a fascinating extra dimension to those of her truly remarkable husband.

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Endnote: José Manuel Pearce de Azevedo died in January 2014.

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Len Port is a journalist and author. He has been a professional writer in various parts of the world for almost six decades. On coming to live in Portugal, he became close friends with Joe. Len has had several books about Portugal published and has contributed to many newspapers, as well as regularly posting on his blog: <https://algarvenewswatch.blogspot.com/>.