TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Andrew Roberts: Winston Churchill (1940)

[Intro music]

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Peter Moore: Hello, I'm Peter Moore and this is *Travels Through Time*, the podcast where we examine one year in the past through three different scenes. Today, we're heading to one of the most dramatic, perilous and consequential moments in all British, some might even say world, history which is May 1940. We're being taken there by a writer who knows the time better than almost anyone else and that is Andrew Roberts. Through his books on subjects like Waterloo, Wellington and Napoleon, Andrew has become a *Sunday Times* and *New York Times* bestseller. His great, biographical subject though is Sir Winston Churchill, the figure we're going to meet today. His first book, 30 years ago, was about Churchill and he's written five books with Churchill's name in the subtitle or title since. In October of last year, he published his major, single-volume biography of the statesman, *Churchill: Walking With Destiny*. Welcome to *Travels Through Time*, Andrew.

Andrew Roberts: Thank you very much indeed, Peter.

Peter Moore: Before we start, I just want to ask you a little bit about Churchill's completely distinctive personality because he is a figure that we all have in our minds in some way but let's get back away from the legend to the person and the young man, in particular. This is a quote you put right at the start of your book and I really like when Harold Macmillan calls him a 'half-English aristocrat and half-American gambler' but can you tell us a little bit about the younger Churchill? I'm thinking of the Churchill we might meet in around the year 1900.

Andrew Roberts: The reason, of course, that Harold Macmillan called him that was that his mother was the daughter of an American gambler and financial speculator and his paternal grandfather was the Duke of Marlborough and so he very much was this half one kind of person and half the other. You very much get this in 1900 when he has been the world's best-paid war correspondent. He's willing to take the kind of risks that a speculator or gambler would take. He once said that 'there's nothing so exhilarating in life as to be shot at without result'. *[Laughter]*. He also, of course, was the grandee in a sense as well; somebody who believed in the Tory democracy ideas of Benjamin Disraeli. He very much believed in noblesse oblige and, therefore, also believed in the British Empire. So you have these things working together in the same person.

Peter Moore: There's a wonderful bit in your book when you talk about the car that he first owned. I always think you can tell a lot about a person by the car they own and the way they drive it. You say that he had a French Mors. Is that how it's pronounced? I'm not sure.

Andrew Roberts: Yes.

Peter Moore: You say that 'he habitually drove fast, routinely jumped traffic lights and occasionally went up onto the pavement when faced with traffic congestion.' I think this just

gives you a picture of Churchill trying out a bit of new technology which he was always interested in.

Andrew Roberts: And cutting corners, of course.

Peter Moore: Cutting corners.

Andrew Roberts: Yes, and sometimes going the wrong way around roundabouts as well *[laughter]*. Although, I never actually managed to track down any examples of that. Yes, using the driving metaphor is a good one, in fact. He was a driving force, of course, and he liked to cut corners.

Peter Moore: 'To understand a man,' Napoleon once said, 'look at the world when he was 20.' That's fair and I suppose when Churchill was about 20, the British Empire, as it was, was probably at its height in terms of extent and maybe in terms of confidence as well, would you say? Was that a sustaining ideal for Churchill?

Andrew Roberts: It really was all his life, yes. I think you're right. When he was 20, they were only three years off the Diamond Jubilee which, in many ways, is the highest point of the whole of the British Empire. He did, of course, famously say in 1942 that he did not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the British Empire and yet ultimately, of course, by the time he died in 1965, the British Empire was pretty much all over and done with. So he, himself, saw himself as a failure which is extraordinary considering that we, of course, must see him, having been instrumental in helping win the Second World War, as one of the great successes in life.

Peter Moore: This young Churchill that I'm just dwelling on for a moment before we start is, I think, a really pugnacious character. He's on the make. He's in a hurry. He's self-deprecating, interestingly, in certain cases. He is often quick to do down his intellect, which always intrigues me. The famous love for alcohol that we hear so much about is something you tackle in the book as well. You say that he was never really out-of-control drunk as many imagined he was.

Andrew Roberts: No, he liked to show off about his drinking. I think you're right about his self-deprecating aspects. It's very rare for a politician to make himself out to be thicker than he genuinely is *[laughter]* and yet Churchill did do that.

Peter Moore: Even when it wasn't warranted as well.

Andrew Roberts: Entirely unnecessary. It was in *My Early Life*, his autobiography and actually, when you go back to his school reports, you see that he was in the top third of the class in pretty much every subject all the time. So he actually wasn't this dunce that he made himself out to be.

Peter Moore: In that book, in particular, *My Early Life*, he's very keen to present himself as the greatest dunce that ever went into the school.

Andrew Roberts: He simply wasn't, even in Latin, Greek and the subjects that he claims to have been very bad at. With regard to alcohol, it is an important subject because it was used, of course, by the Nazis to try and make him out to be a hopeless alcoholic. At one point, President Franklin Roosevelt was worried about whether or not he might have been an alcoholic; not because of anything that he'd observed himself but just what he'd read and heard. Also, of course, some revisionist historians today still attempt to make him out to be. The fact is that he

did drink an enormous amount and there's no doubt about that. However, he did have the most extraordinary capacity for alcohol. He had an iron constitution. I think that the person who gets it right is somebody who knew Churchill, the journalist C. P. Scott, who said that 'Winston Churchill couldn't have been an alcoholic because no alcoholic could have drunk that much.' *[Laughter]*.

Peter Moore: That's a nice way of putting it and also, there's a nice quote here that you've got which is from Churchill himself when he says 'a single glass of champagne imparts a feeling of exhilaration: the nerves are braced; the imagination is agreeably stirred; the wits become more nimble.' This takes me on to the other thing that I wanted just to think about...

Andrew Roberts: Sorry, but he also goes on in that same quote to say that 'a bottle of champagne, on the other hand, has the opposite effect.'

Peter Moore: Okay, so there's a moderation force and we always forget the end of the quote. Okay, that's interesting in itself but what I was thinking of getting into was that he was just a very, very good writer as well. He had a wonderful clarity of expression.

Andrew Roberts: Because he was a good reader. When he was up in the North-West Frontier in India, in the late 1890s, he read the whole of the Western canon, basically. It was extraordinary how much he read, especially great writers like Macaulay and Gibbon. He could quote Shakespeare for hours at a time and as a result, you have somebody who, therefore, was able to create phrases that will last really for as long as our language lasts.

Peter Moore: Exactly. I just wanted to have that little picture of Churchill as a young man, to begin with, because it plays against everything he became later on. I just want to whizz through the career of someone who did achieve high office at a relatively young age. He was one of the youngest serving Cabinet officers in history at that time. He was active throughout the early part of the 20th century. He gained a reputation for having bad judgement, generally, but was also the continual force within British politics at this time.

Andrew Roberts: Bad judgement over fairly important things like women's suffrage, the Gold Standard, the abdication crisis, the Black and Tans and the Dardanelles' catastrophe. There is a long list of things in which he did show bad judgement but when it came to the most important things of the 20th century, such as the rise of Prussian militarism, German Nazis and Soviet imperialism, he got each of those things right and, in many cases, was the only person to do so and the most prominent person to do so for a very long time.

Peter Moore: Yeah, and I think they're points you bring out wonderfully in the book and at the same time, I think it's just the fact that his adversaries in Parliament were particularly clever at using this reputation he had, as someone of poor judgement, to keep him marginalised at this point and throughout the late 30s.

Andrew Roberts: That's right. You certainly see that, as you say, throughout the late 30s; this long list of mistakes he made were used against him. In a sense, perfectly reasonably, of course you should be able to use a politician's previous actions against him. He'd certainly have used them had they all been successes in his favour and so it's not entirely unfair really. Nonetheless, when I mentioned about how some things were trivial and other things were important, really there was, in the late 1930s, nothing more important than warning against the rise of Hitler and the Nazis.

Peter Moore: Brilliant. Let's go to the heart of the matter which is May 1940 where Churchill, who's been this figure for so, so long on the political scene, really starts to move towards the premiership. That's basically the arc of the story we're going to tell today but it all starts really on 7th May with what you call the Norway Debate. Do you want to tell us what the Norway Debate was in Parliament?

Andrew Roberts: The debate on both 7th and 8th May 1940, which is known to history as the Norway Debate, was actually a debate on whether or not to adjourn the House of Commons but because it took place in the immediate aftermath of the allied defeat in Norway at the hands of the Germans, it obviously became a debate on not only the Government campaign in Norway but also actually on the Chamberlain government itself. Therefore, the fate of the Government was in the balance at this great two-day debate.

Peter Moore: Yeah, so you've got a long-standing policy of appeasement which preceded the war in its opening stages through the winter of 1940 and then there's the extremely well-executed invasion of Norway and Denmark from the Nazis which is the immediate contextual background to this.

Andrew Roberts: That's right. That happened on 9th April 1940 and for the next month, the Allies - the French and British - tried to fight against the Germans in Norway. By the time of the Norway Debate, it was clear that they'd been defeated.

Peter Moore: In the House of Commons on this day, obviously, Churchill is there. Chamberlain, in a way, is the Prime Minister at the despatch box but he's also a little bit like, I suppose, the defendant on trial in a way. It seems to be like one of these classic set pieces from the Roman Empire when you have a Cicero moment of lots of speeches being given in succession by important figures. Do you want to tell us a few of the people who would have been in the Commons on that day?

Andrew Roberts: That's right. Actually, when he attempted to defend his government the day before, Chamberlain started the debate on 7th and made a major speech. Then, of course, you had the Leader of the Labour Party, Clement Attlee; the Deputy Leader, Arthur Greenwood; the Leader of the Liberal Party, Archie Sinclair; the various ministers who'd been involved in the Norway campaign; the Minister for Air, Sir Samuel Hoare; Oliver Stanley, the War Minister. You had some of the most famous members of the House of Commons, such as the previous Prime Minister, Lloyd George. Also, you had important contributions made by former Cabinet Ministers, such as Leo Amery. You had a speech from the Admiral of the Fleet, who was also a Conservative MP called Sir Roger Keyes, who turned up with six rows of medal ribbons in his Admiral of the Fleet uniform. He was a tremendously imposing sight, as you can imagine. He'd won the Victoria Cross as well. There were series of speeches made by some of the most serious critics of the Government, like Alfred Duff Cooper, who had resigned over the Munich Agreement in 1938, and others. It was, therefore, an opportunity really for the whole House of Commons to have a debate about the future of the Chamberlain government and an awful lot of the people involved in it were either highly critical of the Government or many who should have been defending the Government really just stayed silent and didn't. There were an awful lot of abstentions and this was also something that was held to be highly detrimental for Chamberlain's chances of survival.

Peter Moore: At the same time, I suppose, there's an extra dimension to this as well because whilst Chamberlain is maybe having lots of opinions broadcast or spoken aloud about his performance as Prime Minister, you've got, sitting very, very close to him, the person that many

would prefer to be in his place, Churchill. That's a peculiar position for Churchill to be in. Would he be immensely enjoying this occasion, do you think?

Andrew Roberts: If he was enjoying the occasion, he wasn't allowed to make it clear. He very much had to defend the Prime Minister and the Government; not least, of course, because he had, in fact, in Norway, been equally as responsible for the decisions that were taken as anybody else. He was First Lord of the Admiralty, a very important position in charge of the Royal Navy and it was a largely naval operation in Norway. He had his own position to defend. Although there were some in the House of Commons who wanted him to take over rather than have Chamberlain, overwhelmingly, the largest body of opinion was that of the ordinary Conservative backbencher and they tended to support Neville Chamberlain still very much. You see this, actually, when the vote was taken and when the Government won that vote by 281 to 200 but because that was such a huge drop...

Peter Moore: The size of the majority.

Andrew Roberts: ...from the size of the majority from the previous General Election in 1935, it was seen as a massive moral defeat for the Government.

Peter Moore: As you say, at the same time, there were these incredibly important figures in British politics making speeches. You've got Lloyd George, who's very critical. Maybe there's an element of revenge in what he's saying as well.

Andrew Roberts: Very much, yes. Lloyd George hated Neville Chamberlain ever since Neville Chamberlain had been instrumental in helping bring him down as Prime Minister in October 1922. He'd been waiting for this moment. He'd been sharpening his knife.

Peter Moore: His knife was very sharp at this point, I would imagine.

Andrew Roberts: He loathed Neville Chamberlain and so when he said that everybody needed to make sacrifices in this war and what the Prime Minister needed to do was to sacrifice the Seals of Office, it was a jibe that he'd been waiting for years to make.

Peter Moore: The intervention I always think of being hugely significant, that you mentioned, is the one from Leo Amery when he says 'you've sat here too long for any good you've been doing' which is an echo of Cromwell, is it not?

Andrew Roberts: A direct quote from Oliver Cromwell in expelling one of the parliaments.

Peter Moore: 'Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go.' It's one of those lines, isn't it? You talk about Chamberlain being 'white as chalk' as he sat there listening to these verdicts on his leadership. He won the vote but there was a great moral loss of power, wasn't there?

Andrew Roberts: That's right. Suddenly, his premiership was flung into huge doubt. It was felt, especially by senior figures in the Conservative Party, that what was needed more than anything else really was a national government - a proper national government - in which the Labour Party and the Liberal Party came in and, therefore, presented to Hitler a united coalition. The question then was going to be whether or not Labour and the Liberals would be willing to enter that government with Neville Chamberlain as the Prime Minister.

Peter Moore: It's a tremendous set-piece scene. It really is. You mention that, very strangely for the House of Commons at this point, there are some visual records of what was happening. Was there a surreptitious photographer in the Gallery?

Andrew Roberts: Well no, there was an actual MP, who wasn't in the Gallery. He was on the floor of the House of Commons. He was called John Moore-Brabazon. He had bought a little Minox camera, which was a tiny little thing about only one inch by two inches or so. Against all the rules of the House of Commons, he started taking photographs of the actual Norway Debate as it was going on.

Peter Moore: This is very unusual, at this time, to have a visual record...

Andrew Roberts: I know.

Peter Moore: ...of such an important occasion.

Andrew Roberts: Entirely unknown and it's the only one that we have, actually, of the House of Commons sitting at that time.

Peter Moore: What can we see in these photos? Are they clear?

Andrew Roberts: They're not. They're fairly smudgy but we can see Chamberlain on his feet. We can see Winston Churchill sitting down quite close to him. We can see how packed the House of Commons was. There was no room whatsoever for anybody. We can see the benches, therefore, completely full of people. It's fascinating to see how many people there are and all looking incredibly smart, of course. Everybody, of course, wore stiff collars, and ties, and things like that. It was, in that sense, very orderly but it became very disorderly at the end of the debate when people started shouting and yelling. Some people started to try and sing *Rule Britannia* and they were shouted down by people of their own party. There were people yelling at the Prime Minister to resign and it all started getting very noisy.

Peter Moore: I'm just trying to think and were you there, I suppose it would be a transfixing occasion and really, it's difficult to think of an analogy for something in my lifetime; the great parliamentary occasions of maybe Robin Cook making a speech on the eve of the war with Iraq in 2003 or maybe before that when you have Geoffrey Howe talking about cricket bats at the end of Margaret Thatcher's time.

Andrew Roberts: I think if you add all of those put together, including all the upsets over Brexit, one way and another, and everything that we've had to do with the Iraq War and you multiply them all by five, you still don't get quite the sense of the Norway Debate which is, of course, actually taking place in a world war.

Peter Moore: Everyone knows, at this time, that Hitler has all these armoured divisions that are just sitting on the border. Nothing has happened yet.

Andrew Roberts: The attack could happen at any time and he's already taken Poland. He's already taken, as we mentioned earlier, Denmark and Norway.

Peter Moore: So whilst you have the arch appeaser in the dock, so to speak, you have Churchill very close by. This is a quote I love and probably my favourite of Churchill's quotes before the war when he said, 'Certainly, a very terrible war is going to happen' - I think he said this at All

Souls in Oxford - 'in which London will be bombed and Buckingham Palace will be razed to the ground and the lions and tigers will escape from the zoo and roam through the streets of London attacking people.' That's very Churchillian, isn't it? It's a clever, vivid image but, at the heart of it, quite a serious message.

Andrew Roberts: Funnily enough, a zebra did escape from Regent's Park Zoo during The Blitz. In the Berlin Zoo, they had to put down all the crocodiles, lions and tigers because they feared the same thing was going to happen. Obviously, Buckingham Palace was bombed but wasn't razed to the ground but plenty of other very important buildings in London were and so this was not scaremongering.

Peter Moore: Yeah, and plenty of crocodiles in the Commons that day. Let's go from that to your next scene. The second scene is Number Ten, Downing Street on 9th May 1940. Now this is a completely hinge moment, isn't it? The debate has been had. Chamberlain is waking up in the morning hoping at this point, I think, to cling on to power. Is this right?

Andrew Roberts: Yes, that's right. On the morning of Thursday 9th May, Chamberlain sent out his Whips in order to try to ensure that he could stay as Prime Minister by affecting a reconstruction of the Government and dumping a few of the ministers who he thought were unpopular and bring the Labour Party in under his premiership. So a lot of horse-trading is going on in Number Ten and MPs are being brought in to see whether or not they could support the Government under certain circumstances. Threats are being made and promises are being made but at the same time, in the afternoon, when it becomes pretty clear that Chamberlain can't survive, the Labour Party turn up (or at least two members of them - the Leader and the Deputy Leader, Clement Attlee and Arthur Greenwood) and they have a meeting at which they tell Neville Chamberlain, Winston Churchill and the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, who is another person who could become Prime Minister, that they will go down to the Labour Party in Bournemouth, where it's having its conference, and they will decide whether or not to enter the Government.

Peter Moore: So were you in Downing Street on 9th May in 1940, this would be a place of huge activity, lots of tension and lots of uncertainty really, more than anything.

Andrew Roberts: That's right. What happened when the Labour leaders left was that David Margesson, the Chief Whip, came in and started to explain the political situation in the House of Commons. It pretty much dawned on Neville Chamberlain, at this point, that he wasn't going to be able to survive and, sure enough, when the Labour Party reported from Bournemouth later on, they said that they wouldn't go into a national government under Neville Chamberlain. It became clear that it had to be either Lord Halifax or Winston Churchill who was going to become Prime Minister.

Peter Moore: I was thinking, in a way, there were three outcomes that were possible; Chamberlain stays, Halifax becomes Prime Minister or Churchill accedes to the premiership but really, it's not possible for Chamberlain to stay at all. It's between the two of them. Is that right?

Andrew Roberts: He had the numbers in the House of Commons to stay if he'd wanted to but actually, he was pretty much holed below the waterline. If the Government needed to turn into a national government by bringing in Labour and the Liberals, then he couldn't stay as Prime Minister.

Peter Moore: Now at 4:30 in the afternoon, as the afternoon is drawing on, there's a meeting. The four people you mention are at this meeting and it's unminuted. Often, when I talk to historians in this podcast, they like to be at a particular moment to see what was happening at a particular time. I wonder whether you'd have liked to have been in the room at this meeting and eavesdropping because this seems completely crucial to the events as they unfold.

Andrew Roberts: If you'd brought a small guillotine, Peter, I would allow you to chop off my left finger *[laughter]* in order for me to have been a fly on the wall at that meeting.

Peter Moore: Well, there is a guillotine just over there.

Andrew Roberts *[Laughter]* Yes, that would have been absolutely fascinating to have seen precisely what was said.

Peter Moore: Can you tell us about the four people that were in this meeting?

Andrew Roberts: Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill, of course, were two. The other one was Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary, who was a politician and had been since he was in his early 20s. He'd been Viceroy of India. He was a very serious and substantial figure. He was a fox-hunting, Anglo-Catholic Christian and who was somebody who could easily have become Prime Minister. He certainly had the CV for it. The question is whether or not he had the stomach for it and whether he wanted to become Prime Minister and to stymie Winston Churchill who, of course, had been waiting his whole life to become Prime Minister and who wanted to be ever since he'd gone into the House of Commons in his 20s.

Peter Moore: Reading your evaluation of this, it seems that the logical conclusion of what should have happened that day, if you look at numbers and the interests of various different factions, parties and people who were important, is that Halifax is the more likely of the two to become Prime Minister.

Andrew Roberts: Yes, if it was down to a vote of the Conservative Party, Halifax would have got it or pretty much any other wider group: the King wanted Halifax; *The Times* wanted Halifax; the Cabinet, overall, would have voted for Halifax; the House of Lords wanted Halifax; and, as I say, the Parliamentary Party and also the wider Party in the country would probably have gone for Halifax as well. So really, the only group that was going to go for Churchill was Churchill himself. As it turned out, there were these four people in the Cabinet Room, at that particular time and at that particular place and moment in history. It really was extraordinarily lucky for Churchill to have been appointed by these four aristocratic, white males - all of them.

Peter Moore: Yeah, it wasn't a very democratic process.

Andrew Roberts: Not all, no. Neville Chamberlain came from the middle classes but the rest of them were upper class. They were all people who were MPs, of course, but that's about it *[laughter]*. They decided this man, Winston Churchill, was going to be called on by the King if the Labour Party decided not to join the Government under Chamberlain, which is exactly what happened.

Peter Moore: I'm sure you'll correct me if I get this wrong but isn't it one Old Etonian, two Old Harrovians and one from Rugby School? Is this the electorate we're talking about?

Andrew Roberts: All public schoolboys and very much Oxbridge types. Indeed, had Neville Chamberlain's father, Joseph, survived and not died young, or at least died early, he would probably have been an earl himself and so all four of them would have been aristocrats.

Peter Moore: Is it useful, at this point, to cast our minds back to the analogy of Churchill's driving with him spotting a shortcut? Because one of the questions you ask is whether Churchill was offered this job or whether he saw an opportunity and he grabbed it.

Andrew Roberts: Yes, that's right. There's a huge debate about exactly what was said, which is one of the reasons that I'd like to be the fly on the wall and know. Lots of accounts have been given of this meeting by all of the people there and different recollections of it. Winston Churchill's is, I believe, the least believable of them. Not only did he get the time and the date of the meeting wrong and the number of people in the room wrong, he also claimed that there was a two-minute silence. He said something like there was an 'Armistice Day silence' which was, of course, two minutes of a very long silence before Lord Halifax agreed to let him be Prime Minister instead of himself. I don't believe this for a moment. All his life, he had always argued for every place he'd ever got in politics and I think he set out his stall and insisted on the premiership. That certainly is not contradicted by any of the other accounts. The idea that he just waited at this key moment in his life for this plum job that he'd always wanted to fall into his lap, I simply don't think is believable or tenable. It's all in Chapter 19 in my book because what I've done is to give the reader everybody's different view on it. So if you want to take a different aspect or take away a different idea, then, of course, you're in every position to do so. What I personally think happened is that Churchill demanded the job.

Peter Moore: Are we to understand that by the time they left that room and this unminuted meeting, it was understood that Churchill was to be Prime Minister?

Andrew Roberts: It wasn't an official meeting, you see. It wasn't like a Cabinet meeting or a Committee meeting. There was no reason...

Peter Moore: But the important ones rarely are, are they?

Andrew Roberts: Well, exactly. It was a Party meeting between four Tories and that would not have been minuted. There's nothing suspicious about the fact that it was unminuted.

Peter Moore: I only think it's suspicious from the historical curiosity of the moment and that sometimes the most interesting history comes where you can't see with clarity what happens and you have to kind of project your ideas...

Andrew Roberts: They were all extremely busy. There was a war on *[laughter]*. They all had other things to do. There was a massive constitutional and political crisis going on, so they didn't all then sit down and write down what everybody had said. They had to remember it years later, some of them, or they told other people who then did write it down. As you say, this is part of the fascination for history.

Peter Moore: Third and last, we're in Buckingham Palace the next day, 10th May 1940, but overnight, they've had news of the Nazi invasion. Is that correct?

Andrew Roberts: That's right. At dawn, on Friday 10th May 1940, Hitler unleashed Blitzkrieg on the West by invading Holland, Belgium and Luxembourg. Of course, shortly afterwards, a few days later, he was to invade France as well. When the Cabinet met early that morning, it was

in a state of extreme crisis because the Government was faced with this huge invasion in the West. The army was fighting on the Western Front. Chamberlain attempted to use this new crisis to stay in office and to argue that you couldn't have a change of Prime Minister in the middle of a massive crisis like this.

Peter Moore: Sounds familiar *[laughter]*.

Andrew Roberts: Yes, absolutely. In fact, there had to be a change of Prime Minister because they needed to get the Labour Party in now and this was pointed out even by a loyalist supporter of Chamberlain's called Sir Kingsley Wood, who said that, in fact, the new crisis meant that Chamberlain most definitely did have to go. Sure enough, he did. He went to Buckingham Palace and tendered his resignation to the King. The King, King George VI, actually suggested Halifax at this point as Prime Minister and said that his peerage could be put into abeyance.

Peter Moore: So he could appear in the House of Commons?

Andrew Roberts: So he could appear in the House of Commons and not necessarily to vote but speak in the House of Commons. By that stage, Chamberlain had agreed, of course, the day before at this key meeting that we were just speaking about on 9th May, to have Churchill as Prime Minister and not Lord Halifax. He made that clear to the King and so sometime after six PM that evening, the King called for Churchill to Buckingham Palace for an audience.

Peter Moore: This is almost like the third stage of a process going on here because we've seen Churchill, in a way, being given the support of the Commons during the Norway Debate. We've then gone to a much smaller cluster of very powerful people right at the heart of government. He's come out of that but now he's going to meet the King, which is the very formal part of the constitutional process of becoming Prime Minister.

Andrew Roberts: It's a little bit more complicated than that in that he didn't get any kind of support from the House of Commons to be Prime Minister at the Norway Debate. All that the Norway Debate did was to undermine Chamberlain. What happened on the second day - you're right - it was this small group of people choosing Churchill but then, constitutionally, you did need the King. The King was, of course, going to stick by his constitutional duty which was to appoint the person who the outgoing Prime Minister suggested and who could retain the confidence of the House of Commons. Winston Churchill was able to do that.

Peter Moore: The dynamics between the King and Churchill then?

Andrew Roberts: Not good, necessarily, at the beginning because, of course, Churchill had supported the King's elder brother, King Edward VIII, during the abdication crisis and also the King had been a staunch supporter of Neville Chamberlain and the policy of appeasement. He had invited Chamberlain up onto the balcony at Buckingham Palace at the time of Munich. They could have, very easily, not got on but, in fact, they got on immediately and extremely well. In the King's diary, he refers to Churchill as his friend. He soon was referring to him by calling him Winston. He was the only one of his four Prime Ministers he called by his Christian name and the two men, very, very quickly, got on like a house on fire.

Peter Moore: Whenever a new Prime Minister goes to meet the monarch, it always seems to me a very vivid occasion. I suppose we have in our heads pictures of people awkwardly going into the room and backing out. Would there have been all of this going on at the time? For

example, things like not turning your back on the monarch and having to go through the polite introductions to say, 'Would you like to form a government in my name?'

Andrew Roberts: Oh yes. Funnily enough, it started with a joke or at least it started with what Churchill thought was a joke. The King said, 'I don't suppose you know why I've invited you here.' Of course, Churchill took it for granted that he'd been invited in order to form a government and so he, playing along with what he thought was the joke, said, 'I can't imagine, Your Majesty.' The King then said, 'I want you to form a government,' and Churchill agreed to do so. The Queen allowed me to be the first Churchill biographer to use her father's wartime diary and what I've discovered from what he writes in it was that 'Winston Churchill had no idea why I'd summoned him.' So when he had said, 'I don't suppose you know why I've invited you here,' he actually thought that Churchill hadn't any idea that he was about to be made Prime Minister, which is the most extraordinary thing.

Peter Moore: Yeah, it's like a little dash of comedy right in the middle of this incredibly dramatic moment when you have invasions happening on the Continent.

Andrew Roberts: Unintended, very sort of British comedy...

Peter Moore: Yeah, very British. That's true.

Andrew Roberts: ...because the King said something that he didn't consider to be a joke which Winston Churchill took as a joke *[laughter]* and responded with a joke. Actually, it was a very, very strange way to start but, as I think I mentioned earlier, they very soon and very quickly managed to make an extremely effective friendship; not just a wartime friendship but something that really deeply mattered to both men.

Peter Moore: But were you there on that day, I suppose it's the idea that you'd be looking at the culmination of a very short process of a few days' time, which has kind of completely altered the nature of Britain at this moment. Is that right? So the Britain of 5th May, for example, with Chamberlain at the head of government and the Britain of 11th May.

Andrew Roberts: Oh, in less than that. In 72 hours, you'd gone from a situation where there had been a pretty undistinguished, dithering government facing no immediate assault in the West to a Winston Churchill government of growling defiance, facing the full onslaught of the Nazi Blitzkrieg. Everything changed in those three days; the whole western civilization.

Peter Moore: Thank you very much for guiding us through that process. Absolutely brilliant. If you had the ability to bring one object back from this moment in 1940 to today, what would you like to bring with you?

Andrew Roberts: Am I allowed to bring one that's only two days later?

Peter Moore: I think we can liberalise the rules for a Tory Prime Minister.

Andrew Roberts: Thank you, Peter. In that case, I appreciate that. It would be Winston Churchill's 'Blood, Toil, Tears and Sweat' speech that he made in the House of Commons as Prime Minister.

Peter Moore: Would this be the notes for it or the actual script?

Andrew Roberts: It would be the actual script. It's in the Churchill Papers at Churchill College archives. I would like to liberate it from the archives and keep it in my house. That would be the thing that I would like to do with it, if that's okay.

Peter Moore: I don't think you can do much better than that. Just a few words about the book, *Walking With Destiny.* The whole idea of the book is based around this idea that from being a very young man, or a boy even, Churchill had a feeling or a foresight even - maybe more than that but I don't know - that he was going to be the person who, one day, would save the British from an invasion. Indeed, you've got an account of him as a 16-year-old boy.

Andrew Roberts: On 10th May 1940, that great day on which he became Prime Minister, he was to write of that day later 'I felt as if I were walking with destiny and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.' What I've tried to do in this book is to look at the beginning part of that sentence - the bit about walking with destiny - because ever since he was a 16-year-old schoolboy, he had told his best friend that he believed in their lives that there would be great struggles and great upheavals, that Britain would be in danger of invasion and that he would be called upon to save London and save England. Of course, half a century later, that's exactly what happened and this sense of destiny is something that he kept with him throughout his life. It was only underpinned by the many occasions in which he had close brushes with death, both in peacetime and, of course, in wartime. So it is an essential part of understanding Winston Churchill; this concept of his walking with destiny.

Peter Moore: You divide the book into two parts; the preparation and the trial. What I really liked about our scene selection is they're right in the middle when all the preparation has been done. The trial is just beginning. It's a wonderful achievement. Many congratulations on the book and it's been a multiple Book of the Year. There's a quote from Lord Hailsham and he says, 'The one case in which I think I can see the finger of God in contemporary history is Churchill's arrival at the premiership at that precise moment.' Let's leave it there. Thank you very much for talking with us today on *Travels Through Time*, Andrew Roberts.

Andrew Roberts: Thank you, Peter.

[Outro music]

I'm Paul Lay, the Editor of *History Today.* On our website, you'll find articles written by experts relating to Andrew Roberts' travels. You can read Taylor Downing on how Churchill came to power; Pierse Mackesy on the scapegoats of the Norway campaign; while Tony Corfield explains why Prime Minister Chamberlain fell. Links to all of these pieces can be found at historytoday.com/travels. There are many more articles on every aspect of the past in our monthly publication, *History Today,* the world's leading serious history magazine.

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