RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH HARRIS I. COHEN

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. Harris Cohen on October 7, 2015, in Upper Montclair, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here today.

Harris Cohen: My pleasure.

SI: Thank you for your hospitality. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

HC: Born in Boston on November 27, 1925.

SI: For the record, what were your parents' names?

HC: Mary Goldstein Cohen and Bernard Robert Cohen.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, do you know anything about his background and the family's background?

HC: Not much. My father was first generation born here. His parents had come from Europe, some vague place that nobody can quite find. We've searched.

SI: Was there a village name or anything associated with that?

HC: No. All I knew is my grandfather came over on an unknown ship in the late 1800s. My grandfather came from Lithuania. My grandfather came from Russia.

SI: Wow.

HC: Yes. The name, just for incidental information, Cohen reflects the fact that Cohens in the Jewish religion were considered priests. It probably had nothing to do with his real name, because on the document that shows his trip to the United States, his last name is shown as G-A, Ga.

SI: There was a definite name change when he entered the United States.

HC: Yes, as with many, many people.

SI: Did he come over with your grandmother or did they meet in the United States?

HC: No, good question. I think my grandfather met my grandmother here, but I'm not sure.

SI: Again, do you know anything about her background?

HC: No, probably equally fleeing the Russians at the time.

SI: When you were growing up, did you know those grandparents?

HC: Oh, yes, my maternal grandma. I never knew my maternal grandfather. He passed well before I was born and my maternal grandmother lived with us.

SI: Okay.

HC: My other grandparents, on my father's side, lived nearby, so, we saw them regularly.

SI: This is jumping ahead a little bit, but, when you were growing up, did they speak English or Yiddish or some other language?

HC: A little of each, [laughter] enough so that I could understand and communicate with them. They probably understood more than they spoke.

SI: Were there ever any stories from them about living through *pogroms* [anti-Semitic riots] or anything like that?

HC: No, no, never, never spoke about the old country.

SI: Both sides of the family settled in the Boston area.

HC: Yes.

SI: Okay.

HC: In the West End of Boston, which was sort of a melting pot for Jewish, Italian and Irish.

SI: Okay. Do you know how your parents met?

HC: I think they met as kids. There was a group of Jewish people in the West End, all friends for years and years and years, and they just knew each other.

SI: Do you know approximately when your parents were married?

HC: April 6, 1919.

SI: Okay.

HC: Yes.

SI: What was your father doing at the time?

HC: My father was a store manager for, they called it Victory Knitwear Sweater Shops. Someone, a man, owned two or three shops around Boston. My dad was the manager.

SI: Do you know how far he went in his education? Did he have to leave school early?

HC: A bit of a mystery. He went to Boston Latin School, which was a well-regarded school. I've got records up to the third year. We never discussed it, but he never finished. Whether he quit or got kicked out, I'm not sure.

SI: Your mother?

HC: Mother didn't go beyond ninth grade, I think.

SI: They were married in 1919, just after World War I.

HC: Right.

SI: Did they ever talk about the war's impact on their life?

HC: No, not really. My dad served up in Portsmouth on a military boat, a small, I don't know what it was, yacht or something, guarding the harbor, but I guess there was not much action, not much discussion of it. There was more discussion about the people they knew who passed away in World War I.

SI: Okay, contemporaries of theirs?

HC: Yes. I mean, for years, we visited the cemetery of a good friend of the folks who died a week before the Armistice.

SI: Did your father get involved in any veterans' groups, like the American Legion?

HC: He was a Mason, for whatever that's worth. He might have been in the Legion. I'm not sure, but certainly not actively.

SI: After your parents married, did they still live in that same area, the West End?

HC: They lived there--I know I was born in Roxbury, Mass., which is just another suburb of Boston. So, we're talking about a half dozen years between when they were married and I was born and my mother had a couple of pregnancies prior to that that, unfortunately, didn't make it. So, I assume they moved out to Roxbury shortly after they got married. I'm not sure where they were living when they got married. I think it was still the West End.

SI: What are some of your earliest memories of where you grew up?

HC: Well, I grew up in Dorchester, or Roxbury, I'm never--it's one of those things where the border isn't clear. I always assumed it was Dorchester. Memories? I had some lousy memories of going to Hebrew school.

SI: Okay.

HC: Which I hated, for six years, and fought with my mother about for years afterwards. [laughter] My early years at school, as I wrote there, were not good, were not good.

SI: Was the community that you grew up in also a melting pot?

HC: Yes, people who were, perhaps--what would you [say]?--lower middle-class now. It's hard to define. I hate those words, but people who were either working people or had started a small business of their own.

SI: By the time you were old enough to start remembering things, the Great Depression would have been in full swing.

HC: Oh, yes. I remember things from when I was a kid, because my first real memory is coming down--no, prior to that--is having my tonsils out. In those days, anesthesia was administered by blowing up a paper bag. That, I remember. [laughter]

SI: Right.

HC: I remember coming down the elevator after another operation at that age, so [that] we could get ice cream. The final memory, which is not germane, is getting my foot caught between the subway car and the platform when I was three, four years old, but just barely extracting it before the car started.

SI: Wow.

HC: So, memories started young. My school years were quick, too quick, unfortunately. Home life was okay. I always said my folks were "independently poor." [laughter] So, we always had food on the table, but I can recall my mother's greatest worry was the hundred dollars that she owed the grocer. Until that was paid off, she never was content and that went on. In the old days, you'd go to the grocer, he'd take out a paper bag and write down each individual item. If you couldn't pay for it, he'd put it on the tab, if he knew you. So, that memory sticks with me.

SI: Were there any other ways that they stretched the family budget during the Depression to make ends meet?

HC: No. My mother was a great baker, great cook. In--let's see, I'm trying to think of the right date--around 1940, because that's the beginning of the end of the Depression, my father had been terminated, fired, kicked out or whatever. My folks set up a small gift shop in the house, which was modestly successful, I guess provided enough income to feed us. We had no car. There weren't many luxuries, bought hand-me-down clothes, but you didn't know any different anyhow, normal life, I guess, I don't know.

SI: Before he was terminated, did he work for that sweater manufacturer the whole time?

HC: Yes, right.

SI: I hear stories about people feeding hobos coming through town, having them knock on their back door? Do you remember any of that?

HC: No, we never had that.

SI: Did your family garden to raise extra food or do anything like canning?

HC: There was no place. We lived in a three-story, wooden house, not a tenement, but a three-story facility, with absolutely no ground around.

SI: Growing up, did your family emphasize traditions and religion?

HC: Somewhat. My grandfather was very religious, my father completely less and I'm not. My brother is and was more so, but there was no real pressure. Well, I guess we'd try to follow some of the traditions, because I remember we kept a kosher house. I don't know if you know what that is, but you've got to have two sets of everything. When my grandfather passed away, I remember my mother said, "Now, we're off the gold standard." So, that was the end of that, but there wasn't a strong religious tradition.

SI: Would you celebrate the holidays?

HC: Yes, we did then.

SI: Around the age of eleven, twelve or thirteen, did you have to go out and get a part-time job?

HC: Well, I'm trying to think; when I was probably eleven--my brother is two years older--we had a candy route. We'd take our bikes, ride down to where a woman made candy. We'd get twenty pounds, over the handlebars. We paid--what'd we pay her?--I think forty cents apiece and delivered them to people for forty-five, [laughter] big, but we alternated who delivered, who picked up. So, that went for a few years, I guess. Just before I went in the Navy, I had some part-time work.

SI: Tell me a little bit about your later education. You said your early education was unpleasant.

HC: Well, I'll take you through very rapidly.

SI: Yes, sure.

HC: When I was three years old--I'm just trying to make sure I got the numbers right--my mother was ill. My brother, having gone through kindergarten, she knew the kindergarten teacher well. So, she was leaving me there, early daycare, I guess. At the end of the year, they put me in the first grade. That was a jump that was unfortunate, I think, retrospectively. Then, when I got to the fifth grade, the fifth grade was overcrowded, so, they put me in the sixth grade. So, then, the following year, I went to Boston Latin School, which is a six-year school or a four-year school; you can enter either the seventh grade or the ninth. So, I went into the seventh grade. I was nine years old. I was shorter, smaller, etc., etc. That was the unfortunate part of

my education. I finished that in 1941 at fifteen. So, it was decided I should spend another year there as a post-graduate year, then, mature a little bit--didn't help. Then, the following year, I went to Boston University. I had applied to Harvard and a lot of schools, but I couldn't get in or those I got in, we couldn't afford. [laughter] So, I went to BU and the following year, I was in the Navy.

SI: Let me go back to Boston Latin. From where you were living, was it a long commute?

HC: Trolley, subway or bus and walk a mile. Yes, it was a bit of a trek. Sometimes, we got a ride with a neighbor, but, generally, we took the subway--trolley, subway, bus, walk.

SI: I imagine your fellow classmates there were from all over the city.

HC: Yes, yes.

SI: Was there any friction? Did you learn anything new through your interaction with these kids?

HC: Yes, there was a lot of friction between some of the Irish and Jews. I mean, I was picked on. I was "Peanut." The guys would throw things at me, but nothing that serious that I couldn't live through, but, sure, it existed.

SI: Was any of it anti-Semitic or was it just insults?

HC: Partial.

SI: Yes.

HC: Partial. Yes, I had that when I was going to Hebrew school, too. Guys would chase us, but nothing serious.

SI: Did your family talk about politics at all, what they thought of Roosevelt, for example?

HC: Well, my family was all very liberal, so, Roosevelt was the only candidate they could ever consider. There were other parts of the family were more nearly Socialists, but my folks were strictly liberal, qualified liberal. I think back, "What was liberal?" "Well, those Italians or those Irishmen," but, generally, politically, they were liberal.

SI: Before you went into the Navy, had you ever been outside of the Boston area?

HC: Once, to the '39 World's Fair. [Editor's Note: The 1939-1940 New York World's Fair was held in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park.]

SI: Okay.

HC: In New York, for twenty-four hours, got here six in the morning, we left the following evening at six and got home.

SI: What was that like?

HC: Fantastic, and the one memory everybody has is the GM Futurama, with the overlapping bridges, highways, cars. That, everybody remembered. That was the only trip we ever--take it back, I used to go to boys' camp. Now, I started--I'll go back, there was an organization called the West End House in the West End of Boston that my folks, my dad particularly, it was a male group, belonged to and they had a camp up in East Parsonsfield, Maine. When I was eight, I think I was started up there as a camper, gratis, and then, by the age of ten, I became a dishwasher for a couple years, a pot washer, assistant cook. The year I was supposed to be a counselor, I went in the Navy.

SI: Wow. Was that a lot different from the neighborhood you grew up in?

HC: Oh, sure, it was boys' camp, I mean.

SI: Yes.

HC: It's completely different, completely different cast of characters.

SI: Going back to your neighborhood, the way you described it sounds very urban, but were there places you could play, like open lots?

HC: Yes, in the street.

SI: Okay.

HC: [laughter] Generally. There was a lot across the street, but it was all undeveloped, yes. In fact, we lived on the corner, with a bit of traffic. We played this game, hit the ball against the wall. You hit, threw it against the wall, there was sort of a curbing, single, double, triple, that sort of thing. I always thought my mother was watching to see how great I was and she's watching to make sure I didn't get killed by a car coming around the corner, yes.

SI: Wow.

HC: Yes, that was it. Then, we played hit the ball in the street. We had an opportunity to go ice skating in a pond a couple of miles away, but nothing that you had to pay for.

SI: Were you able to go around the city or did you mostly stay in your area?

HC: Well, I had to; I mean, let me think about it. We went to Fenway Park.

SI: Okay.

HC: They had Ladies' Day then, Fridays. So, my mother took me, and then, a cousin took my brother and, every Friday, we'd go. I can't tell you what age I started, but we went for several years, probably up to the point we went into the service and maybe a few years before. I knew the museums around Boston, but it wasn't the sort of thing that, "Let's go downtown." You stayed in the neighborhood.

SI: How often were you able to go to Fenway Park? You said Ladies' Day was every Friday.

HC: In the summers, yes, those summers, yes. After the war, my brother and I got season tickets for a couple years.

SI: Before the war, that was when Ted Williams had his incredible run, right? [Editor's Note: Ted Williams played for the Red Sox from 1939 to 1942, and then, 1946 to 1960. During World War II, he served as a Marine Corps aviator.]

HC: Well, before, during and after, yes.

SI: Were there any other organized activities for yourself and your brother, such as Boy Scouts?

HC: I think he was in the Cub Scouts, but I was not. No, I wasn't in any group.

SI: As the 1930s progressed, particularly after the war started in Europe in 1939, were you aware of these events? Did you follow the news?

HC: Oh, yes, we were well aware of them, yes.

SI: How did you feel about what you felt America should do?

HC: Well, I can't tell you that I really thought we should get in the war. I don't know what my thinking was then, but, obviously, I joined the Navy. So, I knew I was going to be in. We, fortunately, didn't have any relatives over there that we knew, so, there was no family involvement.

SI: Was your family involved in any community activities, like helping send things over?

HC: Yes. No, I facetiously put that on my application; there was, I think, a question, "What did your mother do during the war?"

SI: Oh.

HC: And I put down, "Worrying about her two sons." [laughter]

SI: Yes.

HC: But, she was active with the Red Cross. She was always a knitter, so, she did knitting. That's probably their involvement.

SI: You were in your post-graduate year at Boston Latin from probably mid-1941 to 1942.

HC: '42, right.

SI: Where were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

HC: I was at a friend's house. Everybody remembers where they were December 7, 1941. I was over a friend's house. We heard the news. We couldn't quite absorb it, and then, you finally realized what happened. That's when we all knew we were going to be in the service at some point.

SI: Did you see any changes at your school afterwards?

HC: No.

SI: What about in the wider community? Before you left for the Navy, did you see any changes, like drills or rationing, or was that too early?

HC: It's funny, because I was in a high school where we drilled for four years.

SI: Okay.

HC: Then, I was in the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] for a year at BU, so, there was always drilling. As far as rationing, there was gas rationing. Of course, my folks didn't have a car, so, that didn't make any difference, but there was meat rationing, food rationing. It didn't seem to affect us terribly. [Editor's Note: The Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP), established in 1942, was an officer training program that serviced over two hundred thousand enlisted men in several specialties, including engineering, medicine and dentistry, psychology and foreign languages, at 227 colleges and universities.]

SI: At Boston Latin, and then, for the brief time you were at Boston University, what were your areas of interest? What were you most involved in?

HC: I can't honestly say any, really. I was looking back just recently, since I started this exploration with you, a couple of courses that I took at BU, I enjoyed, but I didn't pursue it. I can't say that I had any target in mind for where I should go, what I should do.

SI: You would not have known, if I asked you, at the time, "What do you want to do afterward?"

HC: Didn't have a clue.

SI: Okay.

HC: Didn't have a clue for a long time. [laughter]

SI: At BU, did you enter as a student or did you go there because it was part of the ASTP program?

HC: I entered as a student.

SI: Okay, and then, they put you in the ASTP.

HC: Right, right.

SI: How much time between when you entered and when you transferred into the ASTP?

HC: I think it was started right away. Military drill was part of the--maybe it wasn't ASTP. I call it that.

SI: Okay.

HC: But, it was military drill at BU.

SI: What did that consist of, just drilling or were there classes?

HC: Pretty much drilling. There was some exercises. I mean, nothing beyond being there and drilling and participating. I remember twirling rifles. There was some sort of competition.

SI: Did you wear a uniform?

HC: Oh, yes.

SI: Okay.

HC: Wore a uniform in high school, too.

SI: I should have looked this up--was Boston Latin all men?

HC: Yes, then, it was.

SI: Okay.

HC: It's now co-ed. There was a Girls' Latin at the time. Then, I guess maybe in the '70s or '60s, they made it one school.

SI: You were, essentially, in the Army. What made you want to explore the Navy?

HC: Well, probably logic, the fact that I didn't want to get dirty. [laughter] The infantry is not a pleasant occupation. My brother, I think, I'm trying to remember when he went into the Navy. My father had been in the Navy, so, just seemed a logical place to go. I remember, I turned

seventeen in November of '42. December, I joined the Reserve, and then, they called me up in June, July of '43.

SI: Did your father give you any advice or share any experiences with you at this time?

HC: No.

SI: I would imagine, by the time you went in yourself, the BU Campus was probably showing signs of a lot of the men leaving.

HC: I don't remember, really.

SI: Okay.

HC: All I can remember is students going to school, going to classes. I don't remember much of a military activity, more so when I first started at Harvard. There was ASTP there, there was Navy, there were naval officers, several programs ongoing at the same time.

SI: In July of 1943, you were called up.

HC: Right.

SI: You got called up into the V-12 Program. [Editor's Note: The V-12 Navy College Training Program trained potential officer candidates from 1943 to 1946 at universities and colleges across the nation.]

HC: Yes.

SI: Tell me about transitioning into becoming a Navy officer.

HC: Well, of course, it was tough. I went, as I wrote, nine miles away from Dorchester to Cambridge [laughter] and, essentially, we took classes, we drilled. It was sort of partial regular college and, mostly, military courses, astronomy, seamanship, then, there was a lot of history. I'm trying to recall the courses. I remember the astronomy course because we had to go to the astronomical building and you couldn't come down until you could identify certain of the stars. [laughter] It was routine, I think a routine. You're being disciplined, obviously. You're subject to orders, but it wasn't very strenuous.

SI: Was there a high washout rate?

HC: Not there, not there. When I went to Columbia, there was, because, interestingly, from Harvard, I was sent to Columbia to Midshipmen's School. We lived in John Jay Hall. I went down with a friend and we were early, so, we were placed on the fifth floor, which was the first resident floor of the building, fifteen floors in the building. Once you got there, basic orders, you run up and down the stairs, you don't walk. Most of the guys who flunked out lived upstairs. A

lot of guys just couldn't handle it, because you had to go back to your room after every class, "Double time on the ladders." That, I can recall.

SI: Going back to Harvard, were these courses taught by regular Harvard faculty?

HC: Yes.

SI: Then, I guess, there would be a drill instructor in charge of your class.

HC: I don't remember much drilling there. I really don't. We had class. I don't remember much drilling before I got to Columbia.

SI: Do you think your previous education had prepared you well for Harvard?

HC: Not really. I guess I was lucky. I could do the work, just barely, but I could do the work. I suppose going--I think my better part of my education was the Latin School portion, rather than the BU.

SI: You were in Midshipmen's School at Columbia for about four months, was it?

HC: Correct.

SI: You said there was a lot of drilling.

HC: Oh, yes.

SI: Was there any specialization in terms of what you were studying or was it all the same?

HC: No, everybody took the same courses.

SI: Okay.

HC: I mean, afterwards, they asked you where you'd like to go and nobody got those assignments anyhow.

SI: Yes. [laughter]

HC: Yes, but there was drilling. It was the Summer of '43; no, '44, it was. The Summer of '44, it was hot as hell. I can remember drilling on, there was an open parade ground in front of John Jay Hall, in front of the library there. I can see guys passing out because it was so hot, but it was just drilling. I mean, they weren't deadly serious exercises. One part of it was unique. There was then the old USS *Illinois*, which was called the *Prairie State* then. It was tied up at 133rd Street and Columbia is on 116th Street. We all had to live there for a month, very cramped quarters, but, other than that, we lived pretty well, good food. [Editor's Note: The USS *Illinois* (BB-7), launched in 1898, became the USS *Prairie State* (IX-15) in 1941.]

SI: Does anything stand out about the men you were training with?

HC: Not really, made some good friends.

SI: Were they mostly from the Northeast or were they from all over?

HC: Yes, yes.

SI: Okay.

HC: No, most of the people, I think, who were in my class, I could check, were from the Northeast.

SI: You said it was very strict. You mentioned the people upstairs had a harder time.

HC: Yes.

SI: Do you remember any disciplinary actions?

HC: Not really.

SI: On an individual or on the whole group?

HC: The only time, this one might be if somebody cheated on the morning run, they'd make him do a few laps. No, my only discipline came from a guy by the name of Lieutenant Ziegenfuss, who said, "Cohen, you're too young. They're going to send you to Great Lakes. They'll never give you your stripe." He worried me until the moment I got my stripe, [laughter] right up to the end. Other than that, I don't recall much discipline, just polish your shoes, run up and down stairs, toe the mark, whatever it was, but we had liberty on the weekends, restricted liberty. We could go downtown. That's about it.

SI: How was being a serviceman in New York at the time?

HC: There's nothing special about it at that time, because there were a million of them there. You're not unique. No, I don't remember anything particular. We'd come downtown because we didn't know what else to do, go to Schrafft's or something. We weren't big drinkers. We weren't big womanizers, if that's the word. So, you spent your [leave]--let's see, I'm trying to recall, we had from three o'clock Saturday afternoon until I think it was noon Sunday--so, we'd go and go to some hotel, stay over. That was it.

SI: You mentioned that there was a wish list, but nobody got what they wanted. Do you happen to remember what you put down?

HC: Yes, I put down amphibian, because my brother was on an LST [Landing Ship, Tank] and, of course, they made me communications officer on the cruiser. [laughter]

SI: Did you have any communications background?

HC: No, no.

SI: Even when you were younger, did you have a ham radio or anything?

HC: No, no. What it was, the way they instructed us, you've certainly heard, know about the coding machines, these big, secret coding machines. Well, in order to perform on those, you had to learn to type. So, those of us who were in these classes had to learn to type. I can still hear the [instructor], "You put your hands on the keys, 'A,' 'N,' 'D,' 'Space,' 'T,' 'A,' 'G,' 'Space.'" That's the way they taught us. As soon as you passed so many words a minute, you could stop taking the course, but that was the only prep we got.

SI: Those were the machines that created the five-letter code groups.

HC: Right, yes.

SI: Yes.

HC: (Extra thing?) to get in to on the (Adas?). [Editor's Note: Background noise made it very difficult to hear this response.]

SI: After Columbia, were you sent anywhere else before you went to the *Topeka*? [Editor's Note: The USS *Topeka* (CL-67), a *Cleveland*-class light cruiser, was launched in 1944.]

HC: Excuse me, my memory is--okay, let me backtrack.

SI: Sure.

HC: After Columbia, I went back to Harvard; that's when I learned to type and all that stuff.

SI: Okay.

HC: Okay, that was, let's see, I got out the end of October, we were at Harvard for, I think, three months, four months, because they got the ship in April, probably got out February. I had shore duty at a place called Fargo Barracks in Boston for a month or so, and then, I was assigned to the *Topeka*. Now, how I got on an admiral's staff, I have no clue.

SI: You were at the Fargo Barracks in-between.

HC: Right.

SI: What were your duties there?

HC: Clerical. I can't even remember what I did, couldn't have been outstanding. [laughter]

SI: Do you remember your mindset at the time? Were you looking forward to getting on a ship?

HC: I was. I mean, I knew I was going, and so, you just had some concern. Of course, you read or heard about some of the disasters, so, you wonder what's going to happen, but no other concerns. My biggest concern, like a lot of people, is, we left Boston, South Boston, April, I think it was April 12, 1944. Roosevelt died April 14th, two days later. We're in the middle of the ocean heading south, down the Atlantic, and the only voice I'd ever heard from a President was Franklin Delano Roosevelt and in comes squeaky Harry Truman from the Midwest. [laughter] We all said, "Boy, that's awful. How long are we going to be out there?" but that's about the only concern. Then, I don't want to jump ahead. [Editor's Note: President Franklin D. Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945.]

SI: No, go ahead.

HC: We went through the Canal, stopping at Guantanamo on the way down. We got to Pearl Harbor and there was a ship that had been pretty well beaten up. So, then, you began to realize it's a real war out there. I forget which ship it was, the *Franklin*, I think. [Editor's Note: The USS *Franklin* (CV-13), an *Essex*-class aircraft carrier, was struck by two Japanese bombs on March 19,1945. Over eight hundred crew members were killed.]

SI: Yes, that had burned down to the water line.

HC: Right.

SI: Tell me a little bit about getting acclimated to life on the ship.

HC: Well, of course, I was concerned. "Harris Cohen, reporting with *these* orders," that was drilled into us, but I was assigned to what I called, they called, "Boys' Town." There were nine of us in a compartment, three high, three wide, all ensigns. I had coding duties aboard ship, not much else. I had, supposedly, a division of fifty men, including the band, but there was very little interaction. Occasionally, I'd have to tell them what the day's work was and I was scared as hell the first couple of times I did it, because I was probably younger than most of them, but life aboard ship was pretty routine, really.

SI: You had this division. Was there a chief that ran it as well?

HC: Yes.

SI: Okay.

HC: An SOB, if you want to know.

SI: A lot of young officers say that they learned, for better or worse, a lot from …

HC: From the chiefs, yes.

SI: Yes.

HC: Yes, oh, yes.

SI: Was he a lot older?

HC: Well, everybody was older then. [laughter] I was nineteen.

SI: Was he an "old salt?"

HC: No. There was one much older guy, but I'll tell you a story later on, but not really; not much interaction with these guys.

SI: What was a typical shift like for you?

HC: Well, I think, when we finally got out to sea, it was four on, eight off. It was coding, really. The radio shack was next door; they were getting all the coding. They'd give it to us, feed it into the machine. We would type it out. The only interesting part is, sometimes, they'd mis-record it. So, you'd have to figure out what was the word. How do we figure out whether it was "dit-dot" or "dit-dit-dot?" which would make a difference in the input to the machine and what came out, but, other than that, it was a pretty routine job.

SI: You went through the Canal and out to Pearl Harbor leaving on April 21 with the Oklahoma City..

HC: Right.

SI: Was it about May when you got to Pearl Harbor or earlier?

HC: Yes, May 2.

SI: Okay. Approximately how long were you at Pearl Harbor?

HC: Pearl Harbor? We remained in the area for nineteen days and out for gunnery exercises and bombardment of Kahoolawe Island.

SI: Then, you went out to the Western Pacific. If I remember correctly, you went out with the *Oklahoma*? [Editor's Note: The USS *Topeka* was paired with the light cruiser USS *Oklahoma City* (CL-91).]

HC: Yes, the *Oklahoma*, the *Dayton* [(CL-78)], and I think it was some kind of--I'm trying to remember the fourth one. We went out with the *Oklahoma* then, as two ships. I remember the *Oklahoma* lost a man that either fell or jumped overboard and I remember, vividly, they didn't stop, but, other than that, it was a routine.

SI: Was there any interaction with the Admiral's staff? Were you on the Admiral's staff or were you in the ship's company?

HC: Admiral's staff.

SI: Was there any interaction with …

HC: With the ship?

SI: Yes.

HC: Well, there was always the ship's officers, were the Annapolis guys looking down on us.

SI: Yes.

HC: "Oh, you Reserves," but whatever your assignments were, mine were almost exclusively with the Admiral's staff. We had our own, I think, a half a dozen officers on the staff. Those are the ones with whom I interacted the most, except we had discussions in the wardroom. We all ate meals together.

SI: What was your read on the Admiral, any impressions?

HC: Yes. I just found out recently, interestingly, I happened to see a short or something where they're trying to preserve the *New Jersey*. The Admiral on whose staff I was originally was the first commander, the captain, of the *New Jersey* [Admiral Carl F. Holden].

SI: Wow.

HC: Just to me an interesting historical fact. I was a junior, junior ensign. So, I'd bring him a message, but that was it. Most of the messages were battlefield reports of KIA and MIA of Marines on Okinawa. I do remember his first request, when he came aboard, a green toilet seat.

SI: Yes.

HC: Why not? but, then, there wasn't much. It was always [audio hard to hear].

SI: Let me pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

HC: From Pearl Harbor we went to Ulithi atoll in the Western Caroline Islands, crossing the International Dateline and arriving at Mogmog Island on June 1st. On June 4th, we left with carrier USS Bon Homme Richard, with two destroyers to join task force 38, consisting of two carriers, heavy cruisers, four light cruisers and fifteen destroyers.

SI: At any of these places where you stopped in port, did you get to take any liberty there?

HC: Oh, yes. I had to mostly go ashore to pick up the new codes. So, I was always going ashore wherever. We had liberty in a couple of places, one of which was Tacloban, Leyte. I think I wrote down in my history there that we tried--what was it, Three Feathers? Four Feathers and Three Roses [Four Roses bourbon] was the booze that they were selling. I remember having two drinks, and then, we took off for the next day and I was [in rough shape]. I remember Manila was the worst shot up place I had ever seen until I got to Tokyo. When we were in Ulithi, there's no place to go. I mean, I think we had some baseball games at Guam and I think we got off at Saipan. I was threatened with delayed discharge after catching flies from each of two captains in Guam. There were still Japanese hidden in the islands. That was about my only excursions.

SI: I know that they often warned the crews not to go souvenir hunting, because of what you might find. Did anybody break that rule?

HC: No, not that I [know of]. Maybe after our--as I wrote, our Marines and our sailors were among the first occupation forces--so, what they did and what they brought back, I don't know. They could've. I brought back stuff I bought, which I can't find anymore. [laughter] On June 8, we provided support for an aircraft strike in support of Okinawa. On June 9, we fueled at sea with five ships, an oiler in the middle, cruisers on either side fueling a destroyer.

SI: You were out there for a few months before August of 1945.

HC: Right.

SI: What was the mindset then? Did you expect the war to go on for quite a while?

HC: Well, you could see we were winning. I mean, that was after they--what was it?--Yamamoto's Fleet was destroyed. I mean, our fleet was so enormous. I mean, it's hard to believe we could've had a problem. I mean, I can't remember the count, a half dozen carriers, a dozen battleships, cruisers, destroyers--by the end of the war, there was no question that we were dominating. You could get hit by a *kamikaze*. We were aware of it, but not concerned about it. That was just pretty routine. I mean, probably the worst things I saw were pilots taking off from a carrier, going off the tip of a carrier and not being recovered, saw that a few times.

SI: They would stall out right after taking off.

HC: Yes, right. I saw that two, three times. Most of the time, destroyers could pick them up, but there were a couple times they couldn't. Then, we had one incident, we almost shot down a PBY [Catalina seaplane], until he said, "My IFF," identification, friend or foe, "isn't working." There was one time we almost--not we, one of our accompanying ships--almost sunk one of our submarines. Then, of course, I wrote we had that bombardment of the coast of Japan. I'm still trying to find out; honestly, Shaun, my station was indoors, or whatever they called it aboard ship, so, I never knew what was going on outside. In the history book that this ship published, it says, "That splashed and that splashed." I don't know whether that was our doing. We didn't fire any guns, so, how close those were, I don't know whether they were taken from our ship or not.

So, we're in the midst, but never in danger, I don't think. Our only offensive action was the bombardment of a radar installation at Cape Nojima causing an explosion on July 15, 1945.

SI: During the bombardment of Japan, you said you were inside, but can you describe what that would be like from your position? Would there be a lot of noise?

HC: You mean where I was aboard ship?

SI: Yes.

HC: No, it was an enclosed facility for the Admiral alone. He had his "ship," his CIC, a Communications Information Center, and then, there was another for the Ship's Captain.

SI: Okay.

HC: So, we really didn't know what was going on. In fact, I remember, when this PBY came over, one of the officers says, "Cohen, it's your first baptism of fire," but it wasn't.

SI: When you were not on duty, were you free to go out and observe the operations?

HC: Oh, yes. In fact, when I was on duty, I mean, you stood watch on the outside, sit in the Admiral's chair, watch the guys scrub the deck, very nice, very pleasant. [laughter]

SI: Were there any African-American sailors on the ship?

HC: Mostly mess men. About twenty in one division, three in the flag division, none in the Marines or the band.

SI: Okay.

HC: In the mess. They had "officers' only," they called them (scuttlebutt?), but the faucets, drinking fountains. Yes, it was pretty well segregated.

Renee Cohen: It was the 1940s.

SI: Yes, before Truman desegregated the military. I know the Navy maintained a pretty strict line between enlisted men and officers. That held true in that command.

HC: Pretty much.

SI: No socializing with the men in your division.

HC: No.

SI: Can you tell me about when you were ordered away from the coast in August of 1945?

HC: We'd fired bombardment.

SI: No, just before the atomic raids.

HC: Oh, well, we were just providing cover for the carriers, mostly. That's what they were trying to protect. At the same time, there were massive bombings of B-29s from Saipan and Guam over Tokyo. That's when they had the fire raids, but our job [was to] just maintain course on whatever ship we were supposed to follow or lead. It wasn't a very exciting time.

SI: What about when you heard the news about the raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

HC: Well, I think I wrote one I predicted without knowing I was predicting it. A message came through us and it said, "All ships stay fifty miles away from," whatever the place was. I facetiously said, "They're going to blow it up," and they did. After that, we knew it was over. The Japanese knew we had it.

SI: Do you remember any reactions to the news about the bombings?

HC: Not really.

SI: There were the bombings, and then, V-J Day was declared on the 14th, I think.

HC: There was the bombing, then, the second bombing, then, V-J Day, yes. Then, the next day, there were a couple of Japanese planes [that] came out that didn't have the word, but that stopped after a couple of days. [Editor's Note: Hiroshima was the target of the first atomic raid on August 6, 1945. Nagasaki was attacked on August 9, 1945. V-J Day was declared on August 14, 1945, in the United States and August 15, 1945, in the Pacific.]

SI: Was there any kind of celebration?

HC: Yes, yes. I mean, a lot of whiskey appeared that wasn't supposed to be aboard ship. [laughter] Other than that, where were we going to go and celebrate? We had left the Philippines July 1st and we didn't weigh anchor until--I don't even remember stopping until sometime in the middle of September. We were underway the whole time.

SI: In those months at sea, did you ever run into any shortages?

HC: Yes, they ran out of beef and I remember getting Australian beef; not beef, lamb.

SI: Mutton?

HC: Yes, it was awful. Every five days or so, we'd get oil from an oiler, and then, we would transfer that to a destroyer that was attached to us, while moving along about twenty knots. That's when the supplies came over, by breeches buoy. So, we always had plenty of food, no problem. That's why the living in the Navy was pretty good, compared to the poor guys who are getting shot up all the time.

SI: You mentioned in your write-up that you would censor mail.

HC: Yes, sometimes.

SI: Tell me a little bit about that.

HC: Well, everybody sent [letters]--in fact, I have all my letters I sent to my folks. My brother called me recently. He's got all his letters. We said nothing, because they were all censored, but I was censoring mail for the kids in the division I was in, and not always competent to censor them. Some of the stuff was sort of raunchy and racy and well beyond what I knew at the time. I remember referring a couple to the chaplain, but I did get friendly with some of the kids, too, so that they could ask me if they could get off at the appointed time, which I was able to do.

SI: You mentioned the chaplain. What denomination was the chaplain?

HC: I don't know. Christian is all I could say.

SI: Okay.

HC: And not a very nice guy.

SI: I was curious if they had services onboard ship and if you attended them.

HC: Yes. I did not, no. [laughter] In fact, I got a little hell for [that]. I don't know if you saw that part of the write-up, but, postwar, when we were getting married, Renee called to see if she could find a rabbi to marry us, because we didn't have any affiliation. She called Temple Emanuel, which is, we called it "the home office," like Saint Pat's is. The chief rabbi answered.

RC: We didn't know he was chief rabbi.

HC: No, we didn't, but he answered. Then, he asked her if I was a nice guy and she said, "Yes." He said, "Well, bring him in. I want to meet him." Then, we were chatting with him. He said, "Excuse me." He came back with some three-by-five cards and said, "Was there an Ensign Sager, an Ensign So-and-So?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I conducted the Passover services at Pearl Harbor last year. Where were you?" [laughter] I said, "I had the duty." That was the only religious …

RC: But, he married us anyway. [laughter]

SI: Were there any other Jewish officers on the ship?

HC: Yes, one or two.

SI: Okay.

HC: There were two in my division, I think, yes.

SI: Do you think you faced any bias when you were in the Navy?

HC: Yes, a couple of things you'd overhear, not face-to-face. No, generally, it was pretty even, pretty good. There was more bias between regular servicemen and Reserve, but other than that, [no].

SI: Do you think you got worse duties as a Reservist?

HC: No.

SI: No.

HC: Definitely not.

SI: After V-J Day, you and your ship became part of the occupation force.

HC: Not really; well, I guess we were patrolling outside Japan. I think I wrote I was mine intelligence officer for Northern Japan and prayed to God nobody would ever see a mine, because I didn't know what to do. There was nothing [to prepare me], just said, "You're it." So, they'd phone them in and I'd tell all the other ships, "Watch out," and that was it, but that was our job, just patrolling. Then, I'm trying to remember when we finally got up to Tsingtao. Oh, that's when I came back. No, we headed home. I remember, we got home, I think, October 19th, to Portland, Oregon. So, between September 16th, which is the Armistice, we were working our way home. [Editor's Note: Japan formally surrendered on September 2, 1945, in a ceremony held onboard the USS *Missouri* (BB-63) in Tokyo Bay.]

SI: Did you go ashore in Japan?

HC: Oh, yes, I did. It was the most devastated place you've ever seen. Nothing remained except an occasional firewall or an occasional steel safe. The firebombing probably killed more people than the atomic bomb, but didn't get quite the same recognition. I remember we visited a family. I've got some pictures upstairs, that we went. I remember we visited the area. We also swapped with some Army officers, so, we got a week at a rest camp in Japan and Army officers came to spend a week on the ship. That's about all, nothing terribly exciting.

SI: You said you met a family. Was it a Japanese family?

HC: Yes. They were very cordial. We were more concerned than they were, I think, because most of the Japanese postwar, immediate postwar, they would either walk the other way or the men would, some of them would, turn around and urinate. I guess that was their defiant gesture, but they were all pretty beat up. The place was devastated, although I've yet to understand why the Imperial Palace wasn't touched and some other buildings downtown, I think that belonged to the oil companies. That was probably not by chance. I wasn't there that many days. I didn't get off that many. I managed to get off [some]. I got my first driving ticket before I could drive, but

I had to sign out a jeep and the guy, the kid driving, was a crazy driver, so, I got a ticket. I remember that. I don't know what the ticket was and who was going to enforce it and what they were going to do about it. [laughter] I guess the MPs [military police] or the SPs [shore patrol] wrote it up.

SI: From Japan, you went over to China.

HC: No. Japan, we went home.

SI: Okay. You said you were in Tsingtao.

HC: Yes, then, my timing may be off. Then, we went to Portland. I was assigned--the ship was then moved down to Long Beach and I had a month's leave at home or whatever it was. I don't remember how long the leave was, made my first flight of my life back to Long Beach from the East Coast, twenty-two hours. From there, we went back to Japan. Then, we ended up in China, came back to Shanghai and that's where I caught a ship to come home.

SI: Roughly how long were you over in Asia for the second tour?

HC: Well, from December it was--how can I forget?--I went to the Rose Bowl with the Admiral, so, that was January 1 of '46. I came home, I got home, June, at least I was discharged, June 17th of '46. So, that's almost six months. So, we were patrolling hither and yon, I guess, at that time. My naval career was from July 1, 1943 to September 17, 1946. About half was spend in school and the rest at sea. At my discharge, I was awarded two battle stars for Pacific area service.

SI: Did any of the activity pertain to helping the Nationalists in China? [Editor's Note: Chiang Kai-shek, leader of the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang, served as head of state of the Chinese Nationalist government from 1928 to 1949. In the late 1920s, he began a campaign to eliminate the Chinese Communist Party under Mao Zedong. After Japan invaded China, the Kuomintang and the Communists joined together to fight against the Japanese from 1937 to 1945. From 1946 to 1949, the Kuomintang and the Communists engaged in a civil war that ended with a Communist victory and the creation of the People's Republic of China under Mao. Chiang's forces fled to the island of Taiwan (Formosa).]

HC: No, no.

SI: Okay.

HC: They were very close, not the Nationalists, the Maoists, were about twenty miles away in Tsingtao. No, the only concern we had, which was immediately pre-Armistice, was the Russians coming in. In fact, the first stop we were presumed to make, originally, was Vladivostok, but, then, they sent us into Tokyo Bay, a lot of near misses.

SI: Did you get a sense that the Navy was now viewing the Russians as the main enemy?

HC: No.

SI: Okay.

HC: Not at that time, I don't think the enmity developed. I mean, they were our allies at that point; no, not then. That came after, what was it, Potsdam or Teheran? whichever. [Editor's Note: From July 17 to August 2, 1945, Allied leaders met at Potsdam, Germany, to discuss postwar Europe and Japan.]

SI: Over in China, were you able to get off the ship at all?

HC: Yes, I managed to get off for a day or two. I remember--again, I'm sure I wrote it up--meeting, they called them White Russian Jewish families who had escaped from Russia, and having some conversations with them. Other than that, just it was a brief shore leave.

SI: I guess your daily duties probably did not change much during that period.

HC: No. We didn't have to stand watch as frequently, yes.

SI: By the Spring of 1946, were you looking forward to getting out?

HC: Absolutely. [laughter]

SI: Okay.

HC: Well, that's why I mentioned, in, let's see, January of '45 [1946?], before we set sail again for Japan, a bunch of Marines came up to me and asked if they could get off the ship, because they had almost enough points. It was a point count that you earned to get off. So, I spoke to the Admiral. We got them off. I was *persona non grata* there for a while with some of the officers, but that was a good deed.

SI: Was it just some of the other officers or did the Admiral have a problem with you after that?

HC: No, he was the guy that said okay.

SI: Yes.

HC: Yes, he said, "Of course." [laughter]

SI: Had the Marines in that contingent only served on the ship or were they combat veterans?

HC: No, they were young kids.

SI: Okay.

HC: Yes. They were charged, I think, with taking care of the prisoners when we [had them]. We had some Japanese prisoners, at one point, we transported. I forget exactly where it was, Saipan to somewhere else, to stand trial and they had massacred some American soldiers.

SI: I know on some ships, when they had Japanese POWs, a lot of the ship's company would try to catch a glimpse.

HC: Oh, no, they made them scrub decks, I remember very vividly, admirals and the admiral, there was an Admiral [Kōsō] Abe, I think was his name, and a half dozen others. They all did the same thing. They're held in the brig. Admiral Abe was later executed. His troops had massacred seven Marines on Makin Island.

SI: What were your impressions of the Japanese at that time?

HC: Well, you know you had heard how unrelenting they were, but, by the end of the war, as I mentioned, they're docile, completely docile. So, it's hard to put together what you read and saw about, say, Iwo, where they wouldn't give up, or Okinawa, where they had to kill them before they--they wouldn't surrender. Then, we came ashore and here are these folks just sort of wandering around, not knowing what's going on. Like most World War II veterans of the war in the Pacific, we expected to have to invade Japan to end it, and we felt dropping the A bombs was justified.

SI: Going back to the Spring of 1946, when you were getting ready to get out of the Navy, were you aware of the GI Bill? Did you have plans for afterwards?

HC: Well, when I came back--I don't know if I'll put this in the oral history, I may take it out--I reapplied to BU and to Harvard. BU accepted me as a sophomore and Harvard accepted me as a senior. So, there's my choice. Of course, we knew about the GI Bill. I enjoyed it there, I enjoyed it when I went to Michigan. They provided a sixty-five-dollar a month subsistence. Prior to that, they had what they called the "52-20 Club." You could get twenty bucks for fifty-two weeks. [Editor's Note: The GI Bill included a "52/20" clause, which provided twenty dollars a week for fifty-two weeks to discharged servicemen while they looked for work.] So, that was good, and then, school started and we got sixty-five bucks a month. I guess when I went back to Michigan, I worked for a year, then, I went back to Michigan and, same thing, they paid the tuition.

SI: How much time between when you got discharged and when you went back to school?

HC: Just that summer.

SI: You started a regular semester that September.

HC: Yes, right, yes.

SI: Okay. You used the "52-20 Club." Did you do anything else for work?

HC: Yes, I worked in some retail establishment. I remember, I had a one-day job with a guy, a good friend of mine, now deceased unfortunately. The job was, they wanted young men to be lumpers. Well, we didn't know what lumpers were. Well, it turns out, you go to a warehouse and it was a wool warehouse. So, they bring up these enormous bales and you're supposed to put them on the two-wheeled cart and stack them. After about two hours, we were beat. I remember this Swedish fellow came over and he said, "I've been doing this for twenty-five years. This is hard work. What are you boys doing here?" So, we left after four hours of work. I got a check, though, for four hours, eighty-five cents an hour.

SI: Wow.

HC: Yes.

SI: By that time, did you have a better idea of what you wanted to do in your career?

HC: I don't know when that really dawned on me, if ever. [laughter] I mean, I just sort of floated along in my employment history. Of course, after Michigan, I came back, I started as an accountant--until I realized, after one day's work, I didn't want to be an accountant. [laughter] Then, I came to New York and worked for a family in the linen supply, laundry and manufacturing business. I was what I used to call "a high-ranking non-relative." So, it was a family business. I'm trying to remember when I left them, '66, I think--'65, the middle of '65, I quit. I'd been with them thirteen years and I just quit. I eventually joined another company, January 1 of '66.

SI: When you finished up your undergraduate degree, did you live on campus then?

HC: No, I had to commute, because there were too many applicants from nearby. In fact, I had applied to the Harvard Business School at the time and they turned me down for the same reason. They said, "Wait a year," but I was getting very old then--I think I was twenty-two. [laughter] So, I went to Michigan.

SI: That must have been different, going out to the Midwest.

HC: Well, I'll tell you, the first day, a little anecdote.

SI: Sure.

HC: I arrived in the uniform of the day: grey suit, shirt, tie. I hear, "There's a kid, a rich kid from the East." They're all dressed like you and I are now and that was the end of my suits. Other than that, I remember I worked in a--what?--sandwich/soda jerk sort of thing, but I was the first Jew this guy had ever seen. So, that was an experience, education, for him and me, but I spent a year in Michigan, got my MBA and that was it.

SI: Tell me a little bit about, if you know, how the veterans changed the character of the schools you went to.

HC: That's an interesting question. I'm not sure that they did. Well, maybe they did. I mean, most of my associates were veterans, so, it's hard for me to relate to non-veterans. At Harvard, I mean, we were there. They had these very exclusive clubs. I didn't even know they were clubs until after the fact. So, let's say the civilians led their life, we led our lives. I think it's just some of us were older than some of the then graduates or then students. I wasn't, but most of them were.

RC: See, that's the thing when I was at college. We had the Vietnam/Korean War vets and what the big difference was, we were kids and they were all older, yes.

SI: Yes, five or six years older than you.

RC: Yes, they were in their early to mid-twenties and, when you're seventeen, that seems old. So, they were older, a little more mature, drank a little heavier.

SI: Could you see fellow veterans that had trouble adjusting to civilian life?

HC: No, I wasn't aware of it, because most of my buddies were okay. I mean, I read stories, knew guys who had problems, but not because of the war.

SI: Were there any professors that stood out in your memory?

HC: Professors? No, see, I shouldn't, I always say this, I got "a degree without the education," because it was so quick. They combined all the courses I had previously taken, gave me credit. That's why I was a senior. No, we used to have classes, like, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at the discretion of the professor, but, in those days, a lot of the better professors were spending time in Washington. So, a lot of the courses were abbreviated. No, I remember one man, Pitirim Sorokin. He was, I guess, a world-famous sociologist. I remember his course, it was an interesting course. No, I floated around. I didn't have any big impressions.

SI: Were there any groups or clubs you had been involved in?

HC: As I said, I didn't even know they existed.

SI: Yes.

HC: And I was a commuter, so, I was spending very little time there on campus.

SI: After you graduated with your MBA from Michigan, what was your first move in your career?

HC: Well, it started with this, almost started, with [being] an accountant.

SI: Okay.

HC: Then, I worked for a retailer for a year. Yes, that was--no, this was '49--I'm trying to get my dates. I got out of Michigan in '49. For the next two, three years, I worked with a department store, an assistant to the buyer, so-called.

RC: Then, when did you work with the furrier?

HC: That's the department store. Then, I finally said, "What the hell am I doing here?" A friend knew the family, this family I went to work for, so, I went to New York to be one of the assistants. It was a big family business and I ended up a plant manager for [them]. I worked for him for thirteen years. Then, I really said, "What am I doing here?" and I quit, and then, I got another job with this company called Consultants and Design. I eventually became president of the division. Greyhound bought the company; I became president eventually.

SI: I have interviewed a number of people who worked for family-owned companies, but were not part of the family, and that could really …

HC: It's tough.

SI: Yes.

HC: Yes, in fact, I'll tell you, this is a little vignette. When I wanted to leave that company, at that particular time, *New York Times* was on strike. So, I put a personal ad in *The Wall Street Journal*. I got thirteen answers. Nobody answered my answers. I answered them all. Shortly afterwards, the *Times* settled, I put the same ad in, but I put my name in, got four possibilities. The best one turned out to be a family business, which I turned down, and then, I went to work for this Consultants and Design, but, in-between, there were some interviews. I remember a guy who was with Lever Brothers, said, "If you weren't Jewish, you would have a better chance." So, there was still some of the anti-Semitism, prejudice in the early '60s.

SI: You said Lever Brothers.

HC: Yes.

SI: You went to Consultants and Design Associates. Was that what it was called?

HC: Consultants and Designers.

SI: Consultants and Design. Can you tell me a bit more about how your career developed there?

HC: Well, I was the assistant to the president, probably the only one who told him the truth. He was a tough SOB. There were three divisions. There was an exhibit division, there was a division that had temporary technical people, and then, there was a division that had temporary clerical people, which I inherited. I became manager, then vice president, then president of that division, but I don't think I--did I become president before Greyhound bought it? I don't remember, but it was …

RC: Oh, yes, you were president before.

HC: Yes, then, Greyhound bought the company. I was with them a total twenty years, and then, I got a call. We were in Faribault, Minnesota.

RC: My son's graduation.

HC: My son was at Carleton College and we're at his graduation. I get this call from the assistant to the Chairman of Greyhound. I said, "Oh, are we buying or selling?" because there was no other reason to find me, and they had sold the company to H&R Block. I lasted …

RC: A couple years.

HC: Well, if it wasn't even that. I mean, it got to the point, my headquarters--I had been able to move my office from Lexington Avenue to the Meadowlands, so, it was a nice commute--but I ended up with two people on the staff, my secretary and me, and nothing to do. So, after several months, I said, "This is ridiculous." So, I spoke to the people at H&R and left.

SI: When it was still an independent company, you were in charge of the temporary clerical department. Did it remain the temporary clerical department as it went through these different hands?

HC: Yes. Well, at the time, H&R had a similar company, so, they just integrated the two, as usual, took over ours, got rid of half the people. They eventually blew it anyhow.

SI: What were the biggest changes that you saw in your long career there? Did the industry change?

HC: Yes, the temporary help industry changed rather dramatically, of course, the advent of computers and the ability to get people out faster and assign them. Then, of course, temporary help fluctuates with the business cycle. When it's lousy, they do fairly well, generally, because people won't hire permanently, but, other than that, changes, yes, the people got younger as I got older. [laughter] It's true.

SI: Yes.

HC: Then, subsequent to that, after the sale, I started my own M&A business, merger and acquisition. I did that up until about ten years ago, I guess.

RC: Yes, you did that for about fifteen years.

HC: It was strictly for companies in the industry. I'd put together a buyer and a seller, and so, we managed to get by on that.

SI: You retired about ten years ago.

HC: Yes, I think I was about eighty, right.

RC: Yes.

HC: Yes. I mean, realistically, I was too damn old for the business.

RC: Also, it'd been about fifteen years since you left the job you had.

HC: I had worked enough years in my life.

RC: The interesting thing is, I always say this, when he was running the business, it was mostly women.

HC: Oh, yes.

RC: He was the first one …

HC: I was the first one in Greyhound. I had four vice presidents, all women, and they got a commendation because of that. This is in the '70s, I guess.

RC: Yes. Of course, women didn't get to that kind of position very easily.

SI: You mentioned you got a commendation, but, before you had promoted these women, was there resistance to moving women up in the company?

HC: Well, in Greyhound, yes, but my business was dealing with mostly women, women temporaries. So, it was logical to me that they should run the company.

SI: What about integrating the work force, such as bringing in more African-Americans and other minority groups?

HC: Well, as a temporary help company, we really didn't discriminate, but some of the clients did. I remember vividly, we used to supply a lot of people to Lord & Taylor for Christmas to handwrite orders. This is when they were still being written by hand. The man--the order, I forget how many people he wanted, forty people or fifty, whatever it was--the woman filled the order and, afterwards, he said, "They did good work, but how come there were so many black people there?" So, the woman, I remember, said, "We ran out of whitewash," but, mostly, I mean, we had offices around the city. At one point, I had eleven offices in New York City, but, then, I began to close them. I remember, I had to close one in Harlem because I was afraid to go there, but these were the bad days, but we would hire just about anybody who could do the work.

SI: How did you two meet?

HC: Well, I was living the good life of a bachelor in New York City and she was living the good life as a bachelorette nearby. My next-door neighbor had gone to school with Renee and she worked with--did you work with Paul?

RC: Oh, yes, I worked with her, sure, I worked with Paul, and (Marty?) was my little sister.

HC: Yes, Renee is a nurse, or was a nurse, and next door was a fellow nurse and a surgeon and Renee worked with him at Special Surgery. So, that's how we met.

RC: Well, I introduced him to his wife. Marty and I went to Hopkins, both came up to New York to work. I introduced her because I was a year ahead of her and I introduced her to Paul and …

HC: And she got even. [laughter]

RC: Yes, in a way, at that time, you didn't have the nurses and the doctors, the doctors who were married and the single nurses didn't--what do I want to say?

SI: Fraternize?

HC: Socialize?

RC: Socialize.

HC: Yes.

RC: Yes, very much; you did on occasion. So, even though Marty and I were friends, it was not something that we normally did, but they decided to introduce us and it worked out, eventually. He was very slow to come around. [laughter]

SI: When did you move to this area?

HC: Well, we lived in New York City. Let's see, we got married in '61. I had an apartment, she had an apartment. She moved into my apartment. Then, we moved down to 65th Street. We were there four years. So, that was '67, we moved here.

RC: Yes.

HC: To this house.

SI: Okay.

RC: And we've been here ever since.

HC: Yes, and we intend to stay until …

SI: For the record, a very lovely home.

HC: Thank you.

SI: Once you settled in this area, you mentioned on your form that you got involved in some non-profit work?

HC: Well, my wife got me involved.

SI: Yes.

HC: She was the professional volunteer, originally, and I was the New York City commuter. Then, one day, I remember, the wife of a friend was sitting in a doctor's office; we're both waiting for an appointment. She said, "How would you like to join such-and-such?" The following week, I was the treasurer and it evolved. As I say, I think I was in nine, ten non-profits around town.

SI: Yes.

RC: He also got involved in politics, local politics.

HC: Yes, I'm still on one board. I got on the Board of Trustees of an elder care facility.

SI: In your involvement in these groups, was there any particular bent to them? Were they healthcare non-profits or senior care centers?

HC: Well, senior care.

SI: Yes.

RC: That was a biggie.

SI: Yes.

HC: That was the biggie. I was very, very involved. It was an adult daycare, non-profit. I mean, all of these are non-profits. I was active. I was very involved building. We built the building, we were in there. Unfortunately, we never could populate it with enough people, so, we sold it, but there was United Way I was on, Red Cross, Mental Health.

RC: Home Corps.

HC: Home Corps, which is trying to provide low-income housing for people.

RC: In Montclair, yes.

HC: Adult school.

RC: And the one that Stefanelli …

HC: Yes, West Essex, which was for people with disabilities.

RC: Mostly mental disabilities.

HC: Yes, Non-Profit Roundtable. It was this sort of an era when I always say, "There was a light outside the house." So, when somebody needed a board member, the light would go on and most of the same people were on board, of a certain generation. Now, of course, it's younger people, but you used to [say], "Oh, get Renee or get Harris or get Jim or get Joe," that sort of thing. So, one guy put me on three boards, I put him on three, that sort of thing, but they're all community, in this community.

RC: Yes.

SI: You moved here in the late 1960s.

HC: Yes.

SI: How did you see the community change over time? [laughter]

RC: Oh.

HC: Well, let me just tell you one remark we heard shortly after we [arrived], "You should've been here when it was nice," which meant …

RC: This was in the neighborhood. They were talking about the people in the neighborhood.

HC: Yes, it was.

RC: We were the first Jews to move into the neighborhood.

HC: Yes, but, eventually, it integrated. Interestingly, there's a half a dozen families within probably my vision who are intermarried, mostly Jewish and non-Jewish, and there are also bi-racial couples and there's also black couples. So, this neighborhood is very integrated, the whole city.

RC: There's also European and American.

HC: Yes, there are a lot of English people, yes.

SI: Was there any friction, particularly in the late 1960s, early 1970s?

HC: No--well, friction in town, yes.

SI: Yes.

HC: Yes, integration was a big problem. We came here about the point that there was …

RC: Well, it was that year that they were told they had to desegregate the schools. So, at that time, everything was neighborhood schools and that was, like, sacrosanct. You didn't change the neighborhood school. The neighborhood schools were either all-white or all-black. So, you had the courts say we had to integrate, and so, they were trying to come up with plans that would end it, suit people or help them adjust to it. So, when we first moved here, I was still pregnant with my third one, when they had the first of the town meetings.

HC: Yes, and we went to this town meeting. There's a presentation, and then, the audience could stand up and ask questions. So, a guy stands up, "My name is John Jones, I've lived here for thirteen years." Somebody yells out, "Not long enough," to give you an idea of the flavor and the tenor of the time.

RC: If you hadn't been born here, you weren't considered a Montclairite.

HC: Renee was very involved in PTA, school, ambulance, for years and years. So, she had a better finger on the pie of school than I did.

SI: I am vaguely remembering, particularly after the riots in Newark [July of 1967], the African-American population here grew quite a bit.

RC: No.

HC: No.

RC: It was very stable. We always had a certain percentage of black people in town and that didn't change a whole lot. What changed was, a lot of the towns around, Newark and East Orange, were coming to our school system, illegally, but they would say that they were living with an aunt or a grandparent or something like that. Then, some of them just registered their kids here. So, there was quite [an issue], and I think it still goes on today, is that they periodically would try and go through the school population and find out who really lives here and who really doesn't.

HC: Yes, the town has, really, I don't think changed. It's certainly more integrated than it was.

RC: Oh, yes.

HC: Throughout, completely throughout the town, but there's been a section of town which is predominantly African-American. There's still and it's forty percent or forty-five percent against fifty-five percent. It's been a pretty standard, stable …

RC: Yes, that hasn't changed. The school population has changed. The school population has gone from about, when we were first here, about thirty-five percent, thirty-five, forty percent black to, now, it's probably fifty-five percent. That's only because there's a lot of private schools going around. We have a lot more middle--would you call them middle-class rich people? A lot

of people moved into the city who are making big bucks and can afford to send their kids to private schools, but I wouldn't call them millionaires. I mean, they're not the billionaires.

SI: Yes.

RC: There are people who make damn good money and don't mind and they move into Montclair because, one, it's handy to get into New York. It's also a very nice town. It's got a lot of activities going on, a lot of cultural things that appeal to people who lived in the city who didn't want to necessarily go out to the country.

SI: Sure.

RC: So, this was a good halfway point, but the tone of the town, a town which was really built on volunteerism, that's gone. You can't get volunteers. The volunteers are our age group and they're dying.

HC: Yes, when Renee was on the ambulance, at one point, they had eighty-odd volunteers; now, they've got two. So, that has changed, but, certainly, there's still volunteers for the art museum, the affluent people.

SI: You had the fire department, the ambulance.

RC: Oh, that's paid.

SI: Okay.

HC: Yes.

SI: You mentioned you were also involved, I guess both of you, in political campaigns.

HC: Well, I was secretary, treasurer.

RC: Yes.

HC: For a few of the local [races], town council.

RC: Just local.

HC: Yes.

RC: We never …

HC: Then, we'd go to meetings.

RC: We still go.

HC: We bitch a little bit, like everybody else.

RC: Yes. We were always [involved]. It doesn't make a difference whether you're for Republican or Democrat in the locals. So, you don't get the same kind of …

SI: Partisanship.

HC: Yes. It's an impartial, supposedly, town council.

RC: Yes.

HC: They run as individuals, not as party. So, that part's good and the involvement we had, though, was when friends were running for office.

SI: How do you think your time in the Navy influenced your later life?

HC: Honestly?

SI: Yes.

HC: Not at all.

SI: Okay.

HC: I was fortunate. I was young, nothing happened to me. So, it was a three-year transition. I don't think I'd be …

RC: You should talk to his brother, though.

HC: Okay, well, that was different. I can't really say, other than some good friendships.

SI: Do you keep in touch with anybody from the ship?

HC: Well, none of them are left.

SI: Okay.

HC: I think I'm about the last survivor of our group, yes, or I shouldn't say none of them left--none of them are sane, completely.

SI: Did you get involved in any veterans' groups after the war?

HC: No.

SI: Okay.

HC: I'll tell you why. I don't know if this is important, as long as I have a chance to go through it again. I got a card once from the American Legion and I said, "Well, maybe I'll join." The bottom says, "I believe in God." Well, I don't believe in religion in any activity, so, I never joined anything. Although, a little, again, a vignette, I have a grandson who is now a freshman in college. So, he got out of high school last year and there was a JWV, Jewish War Veteran, scholarship, but he's only half Jewish. So, I had to prove that I was a veteran and show up. So, he, and I keep kidding him …

RC: And that you were Jewish.

HC: Yes, I keep kidding him, "You only got half the scholarship." [laughter] I don't know if that was fact or not.

RC: That was the other thing that changed in this town. When we first moved here, there were very, very few Jews, yes.

HC: Yes.

RC: None of the Jewish holidays were celebrated and, within five years after we moved here, the Jewish population in town increased sufficiently. They had so many Jewish teachers that they had to give them the Jewish holidays, because they didn't have enough substitutes to fill the schools. So, they worked that into their contracts to do it, but, when we first moved here, I can remember my kid, taking her to first grade, and she kept saying, "Why do we have to stay home?" I said, "You know it's New Year's." "But, everybody else gets to go to school and we have to stay home." Now, they're even talking about maybe having two days for Rosh Hashanah. Those are the differences that you see over the long haul.

SI: Sure. I have interviewed some other folks who were among the first Jewish families in their town and, usually, it has to do with their kids, like, the school schedules something on Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur and it becomes an issue, and then, either resolves itself or does not.

RC: Right, right.

SI: Usually resolves itself.

RC: Well, now--where did I see [it]?--there's a Muslim holiday in Jersey City or Hoboken that they are now giving, that it's going to be a part of their school year. It's a holiday and it's a Muslim holiday.

SI: Yes, very different.

RC: Yes.

SI: Now, Jersey City, Paterson, all of them have large Muslim communities.

RC: I didn't think it was Paterson.

SI: Could be Hoboken.

RC: Yes, one of these up-and-coming cities where it's been a big influence.

HC: I'll tell you two incidents, reminded me [when] Renee said this town wasn't very Jewish. When I was in the service, we went to this rest camp. We were on the bus, Red Cross was the sponsor. We were going to go into a shop to get souvenirs and I remember her saying, "Let's go in and Jew them down." Then, postwar, I took a trip with a former shipmate and we went up to Bethlehem, New Hampshire. It's up north, to see the northern [country]. We couldn't get in our hotel. So, it definitely was prevalent then.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit about your family, how many children you have?

HC: Well, I've got three children. We have three children, [laughter] a daughter who is now fifty-three, living in Seattle. She's an interior designer--industrial designer.

RC: Yes.

HC: I'd better not call her the wrong thing. I have a son who is going to be fifty-one next month who is an artist, starving artist, I think, did most of the stuff around here, but he's still a starving artist, and a younger daughter who lives in Glen Ridge, which is five miles away, who is a house mother.

RC: The producer.

HC: Yes, but she has produced three kids, thankfully. Those three, one is a senior at Michigan, one's a freshman at Miami of Ohio and one's a junior in high school.

RC: We love them, good kids.

HC: Yes, of course.

SI: Yes.

RC: But, you could have kids that age, could have problems.

HC: Yes, but you wouldn't admit it. [laughter]

SI: Is there anything I skipped over or anything you want to talk about?

HC: No. I wanted to show you one thing that you might be interested in.

SI: Sure, let me pause.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------

Reviewed by Jesse Braddell 3/2/2016
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/20/2017
Reviewed by Harris Cohen 3/7/2017