

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH SIDNEY COHN

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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VERONA, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Nicholas Molnar: This begins an interview with Dr. Sidney Cohn in Verona, New Jersey, on November 5, 2004, with Nicholas Molnar and ...

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: Sandra Stewart Holyoak. Dr. Cohn, thank you so much for letting us come here today to conduct the oral history. To begin the interview, could you tell us where and when you were born?

SC: I was born in Passaic, New Jersey, on February 10, 1923.

SH: Tell us about your father and his family history.

SC: My father was born in New York. His father was an immigrant from, I believe, Hungary and he went to school in Brooklyn. Then, [he] went to NYU [New York University] Medical School and, I understand, he told me [that] he walked over the bridge to New York, NYU, from which he graduated, I think, in around 1915 or 1916. Then, somewhere along the line, he met my mother, who lived in New Jersey, and they got married. He ... moved into Passaic, New Jersey, where I have an older brother, who was born in 1918, and I was born in 1923. My father did general practice, worked six-and-a-half days a week and, as I recall, in the '30s, he was getting a dollar for an office visit and two dollars for a house call.

SH: Did your father ever talk about World War I? Was there any chance that he would have been called to duty?

SC: No, he was not. He was in medical school, and then, he moved to New Jersey and went into general practice.

SH: Where was your mother's family from?

SC: My maternal grandfather and my maternal grandmother were first cousins and they were born in Poland in a town near Lodz, L-O-D-Z, I believe [that] is the spelling, and they married. Then, they came to New York and, I think, my mother was born in New York, but I'm not sure, either there or Paterson. My grandfather was a saloonkeeper. His family name was Stein and all the saloonkeepers were named Stein.

SH: What are your first memories of growing up?

SC: I grew up in Passaic, New Jersey. I really don't remember too much. I know I went to [the] Number 10 School, which was ... kindergarten to [grade] six. Then, we moved over to Number 12 School, which was [grades] seven and eight. When I ... graduated public school in 1936, we then went to Passaic High School. Now, the freshman class went to class from one [o'clock] to five [o'clock] and the sophomores, juniors and seniors went from 7:30 or eight o'clock until twelve.

SH: What did you do as a young man after school? What were some activities that interested you? Was your family involved with the synagogue? Did you have a kosher home?

SC: My maternal grandfather was one of the founders and a major supporter of the synagogue we attended. I went to Hebrew school from age six through thirteen when I was *bar-mitzvah*. Hebrew school was from 4:00 to 5:00 PM Monday through Thursday and I had to attend services every Saturday morning. My home was kosher as long as my grandfather was alive. He passed away in 1941, and then, my mother sort of deviated from having a kosher home. My childhood was mainly sports. I loved to play ball and, fortunately, I didn't have to work. So, in the grammar school, all I remember is playing ball and playing with the kids on the street. We played stickball, football; everything was on the street and [there was] sleigh riding in the winter. In high school, the thing I remember mostly was [that] I was very good in math. I was on the math team, which competed with many other high schools, and we did quite well. There were three on the team. I was also very adept at Latin. In fact, I never did Latin homework, because I could cite, read and translate [it]. Then, I was on the Latin team and we competed, where we had to translate Latin, and then, they gave us an English paragraph, which we had to write in Latin. Also, in high school, they didn't have a band when I started high school. Then, in my junior year, I believe, they started to develop a band. If you wanted to play, they would teach you how to use whatever you wanted to play and I volunteered to be in the trombone section. I was playing trombone in the band. When I went to Rutgers, I was in the band, but, after I left Rutgers to go to medical school, that was the end of my playing of the trombone.

SH: Do you still have your trombone?

SC: No, my mother sold it many years later.

SH: What are your memories of the Depression? Do you remember any of the conversations from that time?

SC: All I really remember about the Depression was that my mother would say, "Go to the bakery and get me three rolls for a nickel," and the economics [of the time], but, you know, as my father was a general practitioner, he worked six-and-a-half days a week. [On] Sundays, visiting hours were [from] twelve to two, and then, we would all pile in the car and go to Brooklyn to see his brothers, sisters or his father. My paternal grandmother was deceased and I am named after her, as were three of my other cousins.

SH: The name Sidney?

SC: It's just the translation, because the two male cousins are Sidney and Seymour and the two female cousins were Jeannie and Jeannette. So, it's difficult. I don't know how they figured it out.

SH: Tell me then, if you would, about having an older brother. Was that difficult for you or was he much older?

SC: No, my brother is four-and-a-half years older than I am and we got along very well. He's eighty-six now [and he] lives downstairs from me. I see more of him now than I did for many years and I don't think we've ever had a fight.

SH: Did he also study medicine?

SC: He was a pediatrician and I did OB\GYN.

SH: Did you have an after-school job?

SC: No.

SH: What were your family discussions around the kitchen table like? Did you discuss FDR and the New Deal politics?

SC: My father was a devout Republican and my mother was a Democrat, so, there wasn't too much in the way of speaking of politics. My father was very interested, loved his work, [and] was totally dedicated [to it]. ... He was the only trained anesthetist in the City of Passaic, I remember, I didn't see him once for six or seven days. He was in the hospital or in the office. We had a home and office together, but I never saw my father.

SH: As a young man, were you aware of what was going on in Europe or around the world?

SC: Oh, absolutely. I was aware and, in those days, I listened to the radio and found out what was going on. When television came in, with the twelve-inch screen, we would watch television. My father bought a big magnifying glass that was inserted in front of the television, so [that] it made it more readily visible.

SH: I had never heard of that. That is wonderful.

SC: But DuMont, which was in Clifton, made one of the first twelve-inch television screens.

SH: Do you have any other stories of your childhood?

SC: My father, being an anesthetist, had a portable "gas machine" in the house. In the '30s, many doctors did minor procedures in their office, C.F. Tonsillectomies, or many women elected to deliver their babies at home. In such instances, if my father's services were needed, either my brother or I had to go with my father, carry the machine to the car, go with him, and then, carry the machine to where he was going. Then, we would sit in the car and wait. When my father called, the machine was carried to the car and back to our house.

SH: It sounds as though you knew from the very beginning that you would be going to college.

SC: Oh, absolutely.

SH: Your brother would be going as well.

SC: My brother went to NYU. We lived very near the Erie Railroad and he would walk two blocks to the railroad and he went to NYU. I think he graduated high school in '36.

SH: He would have completed his undergraduate work before World War II began.

SC: Yes, I would say so.

SH: Why did you choose Rutgers?

SC: Well, I applied to, I don't remember where I applied, but I do know I was accepted in Tulane and in Rutgers. My mother said, "You're going to Rutgers," and that was the end of it.

SH: Had you ever been to Rutgers? Had you visited the campus?

SC: No. We didn't do that in those days.

SH: Where were you housed at Rutgers?

SC: In Hegeman 513.

SH: Do you remember who your roommates were?

SC: I didn't have anybody. Hegeman was single rooms.

SH: Really?

SC: Yes.

SH: The students would be jealous to hear that now.

SC: No, I had a single room. Every room in the Hegeman [Hall] was a single and one of the people I was closest with, he was from Passaic, was Al Schatz, known for streptomycin, and, when I used to get tired of studying at night, I would take a break. I'd put on my overcoat; he lived in two, if I remember correctly, Hegeman Two. I'd go in and we would chat, take a break for about a half an hour, and then, I [would] go back and study. The only other one I remember in Hegeman ... in my dorm was Jay Comeforo and I spoke to Jay several years ago, but I haven't since then.

SH: We have actually interviewed both of those gentlemen.

SC: A third resident of the quadrangle was Edwin Simon '43, who now lives in California. He was from Passaic.

SH: You mentioned playing in the band for the first three years. What else were you involved with?

SC: Well, intramural sports, there was the inter-fraternity league. I was a member of Sigma Alpha Mu. I ... played basketball and things like that and, in my junior year, I ... was a goalie

on the soccer team. I don't remember anymore if it was the JV [junior varsity] soccer or regular soccer, but I know we played Army and we played Navy and we lost both games.

SH: What do you remember about where you were and how you heard the news of Pearl Harbor?

SC: Oh, I know exactly where I was. It was December 7th and ... we had a radio in the kitchen and I was listening to the radio and, if I remember correctly, and I think I do, Chicago was playing Washington and it was a 73-nothing end ... score.

SH: Really?

SC: I think so, but I think that was '41.

SH: Were you listening in the kitchen at the University?

SC: No, in my home.

SH: What was the immediate reaction, and then, as the news spread?

SC: I honestly don't recall, you know. Everybody was upset that we had been attacked, but I do not recall more than that at that precise moment.

SH: What was the mood like on campus?

SC: I cannot answer that question.

SH: Do you remember the convocation where President Clothier addressed the students?

SC: No, I don't really remember. The one thing I remember was that, every Monday, we had to go to chapel as freshmen. If you were a sophomore, you went on Tuesday and juniors on Wednesday, but I don't recall that.

SH: Did you ever balk at having to go to chapel?

SC: No, not at all. That was my duty. In those days, you didn't question. You did what you were told to do.

SH: Did you have any sort of initiation by the sophomores when you went in as a freshman?

SC: Not at all.

SH: Did you participate as a sophomore in the initiation of any freshman?

SC: No.

SH: You joined the fraternity in your sophomore year.

SC: Yes. I joined in my freshman year, but I lived in Hegeman. In my sophomore and junior years, I lived in the fraternity house at 78 Easton Avenue.

SH: Were you involved at all in the government of the fraternity?

SC: No, I just played ball, basketball, basically.

SH: Do you remember some of your fraternity brothers? Did you room with someone?

SC: Oh, well, I'm still very friendly with one of my fraternity members, Sheppard Shaff. I play a lot of bridge now at this age, because I can't play golf. Every once in a while, I run into Seymour Schenkel, who was a Class of '42. In fact, I saw him at a funeral very recently. A mutual friend had passed away. Several years ago, I ran into Norm Siegel, Class of '44. Several years ago, I saw Irv Pape, Class of '43. In this building here in Verona, I've become very friendly with Maurice Weill, Class of '43. In fact, I have an apartment in Boca Raton and he is in the same building and he got there first and I got here first.

SH: I am glad to hear that we have interviewed nearly everyone that you have spoken about.

NM: Did your brother serve in the Navy during World War II?

SC: Yes, he did.

NM: He was a doctor at the time. Was he drafted?

SC: Yes. My brother was in the Navy and he was in World War II. The Navy didn't let you resign after the war was over and, when the Korean Conflict came around, he was called back to active duty.

NM: Between World War II and the Korean War, he was in the Reserve for the Navy.

SC: Right, and he was in private practice.

SH: Where was he stationed during World War II?

SC: I remember Dublin, Georgia, but I don't remember more than that. Someplace around Chicago, there was a Naval Station ...

SH: Great Lakes Naval Station.

SC: Maybe Great Lakes, I'm not sure. I remember Dublin, Georgia, specifically.

SH: Was he always stateside?

SC: Yes.

SH: When you came to Rutgers, did you have mandatory ROTC?

SC: I don't recall. I was not in ROTC. I don't remember why I was not. I don't remember.

SH: I wonder if it has something to do with playing the trumpet or the trombone?

SC: No, I don't know why I was not ROTC. I don't remember and I cannot answer the question.

SH: When you were eighteen, you signed up for the draft.

SC: Yes. I did and I was 4-F. Maybe that's why I wasn't ROTC. You know, I just don't recall, but I couldn't pass the physical. I had two problems, hypertension and I had a bad right knee that, eventually, ... [was] operated on.

SH: For a sportsman, that must have been hard.

SC: It had to be.

SH: What were some of the activities around campus that you remember most distinctly? After Pearl Harbor, was there a different tone or mood on campus?

SC: You know, when I went to Rutgers, there were only two thousand students. My life ... was very pleasant and warm and friendly. You know, all the fraternities were friendly and there was no tension. So, life in New Brunswick was very pleasant and I don't have any bad memories of Rutgers.

SH: I am not asking for the bad.

SC: I say, everything was just fine.

SH: Do you have any stories about Dean Metzger?

SC: None.

SH: Did he keep a close eye on the fraternities?

SC: Oh, he did. When ... in the chapel, he was very rigid, but that's all I remember about Dean Metzger. I had no other contacts with him.

SH: In other words, you must have been a very well-behaved student.

SC: I was not. My mother told me I was not. I will tell you one thing I did. You know, during the war, when I was living in the fraternity house, periodically, this had to be '42, my sophomore

or junior year, because I got into medical school in 1943, they had periodic blackouts and, besides playing the trombone, I had a bugle. I remember, several nights, we would climb on the roof of the fraternity house and blow the bugle. The cops would be zooming around, trying to find [out] who's playing the bugle. No, I was not a sweet person. I mean, I had fun. That's all I can tell you is [that] I had fun. [I have] no unpleasant memories of New Brunswick.

SH: Did you date anyone at NJC or Douglass?

SC: No. I had a friend at home and she came down for the various big weekends and we eventually got married.

SH: Was she your high school sweetheart?

SC: Well, she lived in Paterson and I lived in Passaic.

SH: How did you meet?

SC: How did we meet? On a Sunday night, a friend of mine said, "We're going into Paterson," and he picked me up at my house in Passaic. This was 1940. He told me to get in the back of the car, and then, they said, "Ceci, sit on Sid's lap." Her name was Cecily, but everybody called her Ceci. Then, a year later, we started going out and, six years later, we got married.

SH: During the summers at Rutgers, did you have a job or travel?

SC: Honestly, I don't remember. ... If I had a job, it was [with my uncle]. I had an uncle who had a liquor store. If he needed help, you know, being a teenager, I couldn't do any selling or buying, but I could do stock work for him, but that would be the only job I had.

SH: Were you involved with the Boy Scouts or any other organizations?

SC: Not at all, no.

SH: When you went to NYU ...

SC: I didn't go to NYU. My brother went to NYU.

SH: Which medical school did you go to?

SC: Southwestern Medical College, Dallas, Texas.

SH: Did you go as part of the military program?

SC: No, I was 4-F.

SH: Why did you chose Rutgers and was there a mentor here who pointed you in that direction?

SC: No. What I did was, when I wanted to go to medical school, I wrote to every medical school in the country. I got a copy of the AMA [American Medical Association] and I asked for an application. I got many applications, and then, a lot of states said, "We do not accept out-of-state applicants." I don't remember how many medical schools I applied to, but I applied to Southwestern and to NYU, plus many others. I got accepted in Southwestern for July 1, 1943 and I got accepted in NYU for January 1, 1944. My mother said, "Go to Dallas." So, I went to Dallas and, after three months in Dallas, we were on a trimester system, they were trying to get doctors out as fast as possible. When I came home in September for my first break, I said, "I hate it. I don't want to go back." My mother literally pushed me on the train and I went to St. Louis, where I transferred to another train and went to Dallas. After three months, which was now Christmastime, when I came home, I loved Dallas so much that I said to my mother, "I'm not going to lose six months and go the NYU as a freshman and live here. I'm going back to Dallas." I went back to Dallas and I finished and I graduated June 10, 1946.

SH: Why do you think your mother was so insistent that you go to Dallas? Was she concerned that your rate would change from 4-F to something else?

SC: No. no. It could never change, no, but she said, "You already got the three months, give it another three months." ... She promised me that, when I came home after December, ... if I wanted to start NYU, you know, and redo the first six months of medical school, she would permit me to do it, but, by then, I was so happy in Dallas that I said, "I'm going back," and I did.

SH: Your mother sounds like a really terrific woman.

SC: Well, ... as you know, I have a brother. My brother and my father were alike and my mother and I are alike and we got along famously.

SH: Can you talk a little bit some of the things that you noticed, as far as rationing and the war effort, bandage wrapping and all of that? Was your family involved in anything?

SC: No. Well, the only thing I knew about rationing was, whatever had to be had to be, but, when I came home during [the year], you know, every three months or six months, the only thing that I was worried about was gasoline, so [that] I can go out and see my fiancée in Paterson. My uncle, who had the liquor store, had a very good contact. The only way it affected me was when I came home and I wanted to see my girlfriend in Paterson. I needed to have a car and my uncle, who owned a liquor store, had a contact where we could buy gas, which was twelve or thirteen cents a gallon, and he was able to get it for twenty cents and he would fill the tank up for me.

SH: Were you driving a car or the delivery truck?

SC: No, I was driving; he had a car and he would give it to me any time I wanted it.

SH: Did they ever talk about Prohibition and how that affected the family?

SC: No, none whatsoever. I remember that my father loved wine. He would buy grapes and he had a grape press in the basement and we would make wine. He had two big kegs and that's all I

remember.

SH: Did you take any of that talent to Rutgers?

SC: No, none whatsoever.

NM: You did not like medical school in Dallas, but then, after you came back for three months, you loved it. What made you change your mind?

SC: You know, when you leave your home and you go someplace new, you don't know half the people. You don't know any of the people there until you make contacts, whatever social life you have.

SH: Was it a shock to move from the Northeast to the Southwest?

SC: Oh yes, they weren't happy with Yankees, and they never had Jewish Yankees.

SH: What about anti-Semitism?

SC: No. There's a section of Dallas, in those days, that was known to be Jewish. South Dallas was strictly Jewish and they had several synagogues and so forth, no, but I never saw any [anti-Semitism]. The only thing that I really ... resented when I hit Dallas was the first day of medical school. The first course we took was histology and there were about fifty students in the class and the professor of histology, I remember to this day, his name was Duncan. He would call the names and he started off alphabetically. I remember, the first name was Allan Andrus, and so on. [Then, he said,] "Now, we come to a visitor from up North, Sidney Cohn," and I felt that was improper.

NM: He called you out to all the other students.

SC: Well, everybody was called, but he made a specific, what's the word? description.

SH: Was there any time for any activities outside of school?

SC: Very little. You worked your tail off. I mean, anatomy, for instance, is strict memory. I mean, when you learn anatomy, you [have] got to know [it from] memory, so, you [have] got to really learn.

SH: At what stage in your education did you decide to specialize in OB\GYN?

SC: I blame that on my professor. When I went to medical school, and it does not apply today, the scheduling is totally different, but, when I went to medical school, the first two years were purely didactic, you know, anatomy, histology, pharmacology, pathology, all didactic, and you didn't do any clinical work until you hit your junior year. Whereas today, they even start them in their freshman year, I am told. ... I blame my affinity and my love for OB\GYN on my teacher, whose name was Mengert, who they brought [in] as a professor from Iowa and he made

OB\GYN sound so fascinating. I am convinced that's why I went into OB\GYN and I can only tell you, as I look back on my life, [that] I have no regrets. I worked like a dog for forty-five years and I loved every minute of it.

SH: Where did you do your clinical work?

SC: After medical school? ... As I told you before, I got into medical school in July and NYU and the rest of the country worked on [a] January [schedule], so we were six months off. So, when I got out of medical school, I graduated [on] June 10, 1946. My father took me to a Dr. Cornell at Cornell [University] in New York and he x-rayed my right knee and he said, "You need surgery," and I had surgery, on or around July 4th, 5th, [or] 6th. I don't recall. ... Then, I was on crutches for six weeks. ... Then, I worked for my uncle in the liquor store until January of '47, at which time I started my internship at the Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn, but I was again off kilter, because they only had six more months. So, I was with that group until July, and then, in July, I did another twelve months. So, I had an eighteen-month rotating internship at Jewish Hospital of Brooklyn and, in those days, you did [it] rotating; a month on this, a month surgery, medicine, pediatrics, ENT, etc.

SH: Nothing changed your mind about OB\GYN?

SC: No. Actually, the funny thing was [that] I loved OB so much. ... A lot of doctors hated OB, because [in] OB, [you] work twenty-four hours on [and] twenty-four hours off. So, they would come to me and they'd say, "You want [to switch]?" You see, when you started the year, you knew exactly what you were going to do each month. ... They would come [and say], ... "In October, I ... [have] OB. [Do] you want to switch?" I would say, ... I don't know, I switched several times and I had several months of obstetrics and twenty-four hours on [and] twenty-four hours off. ... We lived very near Ebbets Field, so, on my days off, if I wasn't too tired, I would walk over to Ebbets Field and I'd say, "I'm an intern from Brooklyn Jewish," and they would say, "Go in, find yourself an empty seat and enjoy the game." So, I used to do that a lot while I was on OB.

SH: Since you were so busy with school, how did you keep up with the war and current events? Did you pay attention to it or was it just something that was happening?

SC: You're right. You read the paper. In those days, you read the papers.

SH: In all of these positions, did you ever treat any ...

SC: No, period, zero.

SH: Did you keep in contact with some of your friends from Rutgers who were in the military?

SC: Right, at this point, I can't remember anybody, because I'm not very friendly with any[one]. As I told you, ... the two people I am most friendly with from Rutgers ... [are] Sheppard Shaff, Class of '44, and Maurice Weill, Class of '43.

SH: Was there any correspondence that was picked up?

SC: No, not at all.

NM: You graduated in 1944, after you had a year in medical school.

SC: When I finished my freshman year in medical school, I had contacted Rutgers and, when they sent my grades, I passed my freshman year at Southwestern. They gave me credit as if I were a senior at Rutgers and I graduated [with] my class in 1944. I was not there, but my degree is [from] June, or whatever, 1944.

SH: As you finished with your internship, how did you go about setting up your practice? Did you do a residency?

SC: Yes.

SH: Where was your residency? Did you stay at Jewish?

SC: No, I went to Bronx Hospital [from] '49 to '52 [for] three years. I lived in New York at the time. We lived in New York on 45th Street with Charlton Heston, who was nobody. [laughter] In 1952, I finished my training and I went into practice in Passaic, New Jersey. That's when they had the Doctor's Draft. I got a call, you know. I remember it very specifically. I don't remember exactly when, but, in 1952, my wife and I went to Washington and interviewed the Army, the Navy and the Air Force and I said, "I'm going to join the Air Force." [We] came back to New Jersey and there was a letter [saying], "Since you never wrote to us, we have allocated you to the Army." So, I went out to Governor's Island and I volunteered, but I had to; otherwise, I would have been drafted as a private. I volunteered and signed all the papers and the Lieutenant who saw me said, "Okay, you'll come in as a ... first lieutenant," and I said to him, "Lieutenant, you're wrong. I've been out of medical school since 1946. I've had specialty training. I'm entitled to be a captain and [earn] a captain's pay and, if you're not going to give me what I need, I am going to go higher until I get [what is right] and you'll be in trouble." So, I went in as a captain, which I was entitled to, and I signed the papers, and then, I went home. I was quite religious [when I was] younger and, on Yom Kippur Day, ... you fast from six o'clock the night before until about seven o'clock the next night. So, what I would do is, I'd sleep as late as I could, because I can't eat or drink. [At] eight o'clock or seven o'clock in the morning on Yom Kippur Day, the phone rings. "This is Local Board 38 from Paterson, New Jersey. You were supposed to be inducted into the Army as a private today. Where are you?" I said, "I'm in bed, and, not only that, I volunteered and I'm going to be a captain in the US Army." ... They said, "Well, then, we need verification." So, I had breakfast and I drove out to Governor's Island. They found my papers on the bottom of a pile. They had never been sent to the Local Board 38 and they gave me verification of my status. ... The next morning, I went to Paterson and showed it to them and that took care of that. ... Well, that had to be either September, because, usually, Yom Kippur is [in] September. About a month later, I get a letter telling me I've been activated [and that] I'm to report to Fort Sam Houston on November the 12th, 1952, yes, '52. I finished my residency June 30th and, [on] November 12th, I went to Fort Sam Houston in Texas, and then, the fun began. They trained us and I got orders that after my

training in Fort Houston was finished. I was going to be assigned to the Madigan General Hospital in the State of Washington, I think. I think it's in the State of Washington, Madigan, I believe, Madigan General Hospital. So, I called my wife up. Oh, we had a son. My son, Allan, had been born in '51 and I said, "We're going to go to Seattle." I think it's Seattle or Tacoma, I don't recall. [Editor's Note: Madigan General Hospital is at Fort Lewis, near Tacoma, Washington] Her retort was, "Can't they send you any further?" So, I laughed and hung up. Two days later, an edict comes out [that said], "All medical officers are to report to Room X [at] nine o'clock tomorrow morning." So, we go there and this colonel comes in and he says, "All orders previously ordered are cancelled. You're all going to the Far East Command. You will have," this is now in December, as I remember correctly, "and you're all going to be given a two-week furlough, starting tomorrow," or the next day, I don't remember, "and you're to report to Camp Stoneman in California on January the 6th." So, I put my gear together, got on the airplane and came home. ... We were living in Clifton by then and, on January the 6th, I reported to Camp Stoneman. The weather on the Pacific was so bad that we stayed in Camp Stoneman for about eleven days. ... We had nothing to do, so, every night, we'd get on a bus and we'd go into San Francisco and look at the gay bars, because that was the only place in the country that there were gay bars. ... After, on or approximately the 17th of January, 1953, we got on an airplane and we took three twelve-hour jaunts from San Francisco to Hawaii, from Hawaii to Wake Island, [and then], from Wake Island to Tokyo. We arrived in Tokyo about midnight, nine o'clock, ten o'clock at night, and passed out into bed. [At] nine o'clock the next morning, ... oh, when our orders were cancelled, the colonel at Fort Sam Houston ... had said, ... "The need for doctors is so intense that you're all going to the Far East Command." ... We're now in Tokyo and, nine o'clock the next morning, after we walked into a room, ... there's a colonel there [and] he says, "Doctors, we've got so many goddamn many doctors here. You're all going to Korea. Be ready to move out in forty-eight hours," or whatever. So, the next day, we got on an airplane and we flew to Taegu, Korea, to the 25th Evac Hospital, which was ninety miles behind the lines. Now, when you get in the Army and you're a doctor, you get what they call an MOS, Medical Officers Specialty, something like that. [Editor's Note: MOS stands for Military Occupational Specialties] Mine was 3108, which means I did OB\GYN. We landed in Taegu, at a very lovely [place], probably the best duty in all of Korea. It was ninety miles behind the lines, [but] we had showers, we had flush toilets. It was living and it was an evacuation hospital. So, we were all brought into a room and the Colonel comes in and he starts to read off names and he calls my name and he says, "Captain Cohn, you're staying here at the 25th Evac." Almost all the rest went up to the frontlines and wherever else. There were three hospitals. ... One [was] in Pusan, which is on the southern end of Korea, then, Taegu in the middle and north of us was Taejan, and then, above them ... [were] all [of] the frontlines. So, everybody went north, maybe somebody went south, but I stayed there, which was the best post in Korea. Unfortunately, I found out why. ... They had had an obstetrical disaster three months previous. You see, if a GI got permission to marry a Korean girl from General Mark Clark, who lived in Tokyo, and he gave permission for them to get married, then, there are dependents, a wife and, if she gets pregnant, a child. There had been a stillborn about three months [prior], because there were no OB men there. ... When this colonel, whose name was Draper, I remember him very clearly, when he saw my MOS and that I did OB\GYN, I stayed there. They had a whole ward that was empty. It was [used for] storage. They emptied it out, put beds in it and, for the time that I was in Korea, which was thirteen months, I did general surgery, except I did have two deliveries.

SH: [laughter] And they were successful!

SC: Thank God!

SH: What did you do with your practice in Passaic?

SC: Closed it up, close the door. ... I was only in practice from July to November. [On] November 1st, I closed my office. I had about, maybe, two or three OBs. I don't remember, but I just closed the office. Oh, I know, I had one or two, I remember now, and ... I sent them to other ... qualified obstetricians. There were about four of us in town.

SH: Did your wife remain in your home or did she go back with her family?

SC: No, we had an apartment in Clifton. It's still there, 90 Day Street, and she stayed there.

SH: Did she talk at all about what she went through, such as trying to keep up with letters?

SC: Oh, we wrote constantly. ... I wrote to her every day and she would [write to me]. Periodically, I'd get mail from home. She lived in Clifton and her parents, who lived in Paterson, were able to get an apartment a block away from her in Clifton. ... Allan, my oldest, had been born in November 1951. So, he was there to keep her busy.

SH: You were in Korea for thirteen continuous months.

SC: Yes. What happened was, I was supposed to be there fifteen months. ... I got a call one day, "Colonel Draper wants to see you." So, I went to see Colonel Draper and he said, "I have bad news. We have a granite mountain." "Granite mountain" was a code for emergency medical leave and I said, "What's the story?" [He said], "Your mother had a stroke and we're sending you home. You'll be on a plane [at] three o'clock. Pack up and that'll take you to Tokyo, and then, from Tokyo, you'll go to San Francisco." So, I came home. ... I flew home. I believe it was early February, I'm not sure. ...

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE-----

SC: When I arrived in Tokyo, I don't recall, I may have called my wife or I may not, but I know that when I reached San Francisco, I called her and I told her when I would be arriving in Newark; I think it was Newark. Anyway, when I arrived in Newark, I walked right past her. She looked terrible. She had lost about twenty pounds and she really looked terrible. ... The funny story, the only cute story on her side, was [that] I always complained about the bed. ... Of course, she always [said], "Well, when you just come home, [we will replace it]." Well, when I called [to tell] her that I was coming home in two days or one day, she had [to] run out and buy a new bed. Then, when I got home, it was evening and we just went to bed. The next morning, I'm sitting on the couch in the living room and Allan comes out and he just stands and looks at me and it took him quite a while to get used to me.

SH: How old was he when you left to go to Texas?

SC: He was born November '51. [He was] a year when I left and, when I came back, he was two-and-a-half.

SH: Had your mother's health improved when you returned home?

SC: Yes. She had a mild stroke, but my friend, the doctor who took care of her, made it sound a lot worse. She had six strokes subsequently, until she died.

SH: Could we talk about what everyday life was like for you in Korea? You mentioned earlier that they emptied out one section of the hospital that had been a storage room.

SC: It was a wing, you know, prefab buildings. It was a prefab building and they emptied [the room] out, put beds [in it] and they needed [me]. I ... did general surgery.

SH: What was an average day like? What was the weather like in Korea while you were there?

SC: Well, the weather was very much like Cleveland. ... The day was; you know, we had male nurses. We had female nurses in that hospital, too, but they worked only in the operating room ... but, in my ward, I remember the sergeant. I would come in [in] the morning, we'd make rounds. Maybe I had twenty to thirty patients. See, in Korea, ... all during the war, any major injury or wound, like an abdominal or chest wound, was flown immediately to Tokyo. We got the lesser cases. In other words, extremities, wounds and, usually, at the MASH, at the aid stations or at the MASH, they would debride the wounds, and then, we would do the secondary closures. So, our wound care was really very minimal, very easy. It was really closing up minor wounds. Burns were tough to treat. Also, [we did] elective surgery. Let's say somebody needed an appendectomy herniorrhaphy or hemorrhoidectomy; ... it was ninety miles behind the lines, [so], they put them in a helicopter. ... Then, when they arrived at our hospital, they were distributed to different wards. ... If there was an increase in military actions and casualties anticipated we could get a shipment of patients on helicopters; they could land [at] nine o'clock at night, and then, we had to go to work, ... a delivery of patients was expected, ... there was a medical officer of the day and a surgical officer of the day. The Colonel would go to the MOD [medical officer of the day] or the SOD [surgical officer of the day] and say, "The bar is closed. We are expecting casualties at nine o'clock." So, the bar was closed. And we wait for the arrival of wounded soldiers, and, on their arrival, go to the operating room any time of day or night.

SH: Is that where you held office? [laughter]

SC: Yes. [laughter] Yes, we had a little office in my ward. Basically, it was making rounds and taking care of the patients.

SH: Where there any instances of not having the materials that you needed or were you always well supplied?

SC: Oh, no, we were fine. They got good medical care. The major problem was, they didn't know what to do with specialists. ... One of my roommates was a pediatrician from Upstate New York, but they needed a psychiatrist, so, they made him a psychiatrist. [Since] I [was] doing OB\GYN, I had surgical experience, so, I could do it. I mean, we did hernias, any kind of necessary elective surgery, occasionally emergency surgery, but most of it was not.

SH: You talked about having a roommate.

SC: No, I had seven roommates.

SH: Can you talk about the housing?

SC: Well, in the doctors' ... living quarters, it was, again, a prefab building and there were about four major bedrooms, in which there were about seven or eight doctors. In the middle were flush toilets, which nobody had, and showers. So, I mean, it was good living or easy living, let's put it that way, and we had movies and things of that nature.

SH: Were there any USO visits or Red Cross workers?

SC: Oh, yes. They had shows, occasionally, not often, but occasionally.

SH: Do you remember anyone that you saw?

SC: No, no, because it's a hospital. You remember, [at] most of the USO [shows], you have people who were on the fields, you know, and they had a thousand soldiers watching. No, mostly, we had movies.

SH: Did you ever have to deal with the Red Cross sending someone home?

SC: Not that I recall.

SH: Did you ever get a leave or R&R to Tokyo?

SC: Oh yes, one R&R in Tokyo.

SH: What did you do? Did you see the aftermath of World War II at that point?

SC: Nothing.

SH: It was all cleaned up.

SC: Oh, it was fine. ... Then, everybody went, I don't remember, but there was a spa place near Mount Fujiya north of Tokyo. Everybody went. I can't remember the name of it even, but I went up there for a couple of days. We had ... one week off. R&R was seven days.

SH: In your hospital, did you ever see any signs of what we would now call post-traumatic stress syndrome or battle fatigue, anything like that?

SC: No. Most of our patients went back to the frontlines, because, as I say, we did secondary closure of wounds and any elective surgery of minimal value. Anything major was flown immediately to Tokyo. We did appendectomies and [things of that nature].

SH: Was the military integrated by the time you were in Korea?

SC: No.

SH: Really?

SC: No.

SH: Did you treat African-American patients?

SC: Oh, sure, not many, but I would say yes. When you used the word integrated, I thought you meant male-female.

SH: No, no.

SC: I misunderstood your question.

SH: At this point, there was integration of black troops.

SC: I'm sure there were. I would say yes. I took care of ... Danish, European ...

SH: Part of the NATO forces.

SC: Yes.

SH: Were there other NATO force doctors there as well?

SC: No. This was a US Army hospital, the 25th Evacuation Hospital in Taegu, Korea.

SH: After treating the patients, you said you had to send them back.

SC: Well, either we shipped them to Japan, which was rare, because we didn't get that kind of serious conditions.

SH: You mentioned the other doctors like your friend, your roommate, who was a pediatrician, but was used as a psychiatrist. How well trained were the nurses?

SC: [The nurses were] very well [trained] and only [worked] in the operating room. Most of us were well trained, but some of us had to take extra jobs. Now, I did general surgery, you know,

so, I knew how, but I had a partner. We worked as teams and the fellow I worked with was, I remember his name, Bob (Greenwald?), very talented surgeon and, if we were operating and it was more his field, then, he did it and I assisted him. You know, we worked together. Last I heard, he lived in Ellenville, New York, and that was years ago.

SH: I just wondered about the NCOs or the enlisted people that worked with you.

SC: No problem.

SH: Were they well trained?

SC: The medical NCO's were all very well trained my sergeant was excellent. That reminds me. ... I used to be a darn good ping-pong player. One day, they said to me, "The NCO want[s] you to play ping-pong." I said, "I'll play him," and I beat him, but, then, some Japanese came over and they beat the hell out of me. They were really [good]. They stand about ten feet behind the table, fantastic ping-pong players.

SH: What were the Japanese doing in Korea?

SC: They were visiting, you know, entertaining. This was pure ... entertainment. The room was filled.

SH: Were there other recreational activities, like basketball?

SC: Yes, basketball and baseball mostly for the enlisted men.

SH: What was your impression of the countryside and the Korean people themselves?

SC: Well, it was so difficult to communicate, really it was. My job, being [an] OB\GYN, one of my jobs, besides being general surgery, was, I had to examine the health of the Korean females. We had female help, making beds, waitresses. So, we had Korean help and I had to examine them once a month, looking for, you know, various diseases or something and I never found any. They were pretty clean. ... Then, also, I had to travel to Pusan, to that hospital, and to Taejon, to that hospital, at least twice during my tenure in Korea, roughly every six months, to examine their Korean personnel. I never got to examine the female nurses. We had a crew of female nurses that worked in the operating room, not on the wards.

SH: Really?

SC: Yes.

SH: Why do you think that?

SC: Well, on the wards, the Sergeant men who were in the Medical Corps, could handle the work, ... but, in the OR [operating room], when you did surgery, it was nice to have a well trained OR nurse. I remember, one night, ... in came a lot of casualties. We only had maybe

three or four anesthesiologists. There were seven or eight operating teams and the anesthetist would be there and have three tables, and he'd be taking care of three patients at one time and three operating teams working.

SH: He must have been very flexible.

SC: You had to be, you have to be. You don't have a choice.

SH: You would expect this in an aid station or the back hospital as well.

SC: You have so many people and you had to do what you had to do.

SH: Did they all come in by helicopter?

SC: From the frontlines, yes, because we were ninety miles [behind the lines]. A helicopter goes faster than a car.

SH: The terrain there would have limited what you could do. Did you experience any severe weather?

SC: No, no problem.

NM: Your brother was called back to the Navy. Were you in correspondence with him while he was in the Navy?

SC: Very little. I didn't know. I didn't know where he was, maybe, you know, very minimal.

SH: Was he also sent to Korea?

SC: No, no, he stayed in the States. ... As I said before, one of his posts was [in] Dublin, Georgia.

SH: I meant when he was called back.

SC: No, I don't recall where. ... He might have been at the Great Lakes Naval Station, I don't remember.

SH: Were you sorry that you ended up in the Army instead of the Air Force?

SC: I would have liked it. They had a better [program]. It was nicer, but, so be it. I had no choice.

SH: When you finished your tour there, you got to come home.

SC: Well, I did one other thing that I think is of interest. ... The fighting stopped in July of '54, no, '53; the fighting stopped in July '53. ... There was going to be the Big Switch, they called it,

[with] the prisoners. I was sent to Inchon, which was ... the capital, where the Big Switch occurred. [Editor's Note: Operation Big Switch, August 5 until December 23, 1953, was the final exchange of prisoners of war by both sides.] ... When I got there, they didn't know what to do with me, because I wasn't qualified to do anything. You know, they needed medical internists and they needed surgeons and I really, basically, was not a general surgeon. So, I became the movie officer, and every morning, I had to watch four movies and either approve them for the returning POWs or disapprove [them]. ... I only disapproved one and I remember which one it was, Hedy Lamarr in *Comrade X*, but all the rest of the movies I let go, and then, my day was over. I had nothing to do all afternoon. ... I did not have the option of examining patients. I wasn't qualified. So, I was a movie officer.

SH: Did you volunteer to do anything else?

SC: Anything they asked me, but, basically, that was my job.

SH: Did you see the prisoners actually being switched?

SC: Well, ... no. The Big Switch occurred at Panmunjom and they were bussed to our facility. They got off a bus and they were then taken to their barracks, or wherever they're going to live, but I had no contact with them.

SH: We saw pictures of the crossing on the bridges.

SC: Oh, no. We were at Inchon, in the town of Inchon.

SH: Did you then go back to the evac hospital?

SC: Yes. I went back to Evac. That was July, and then, for six months, we played chess. We just wasted time.

SH: How often were there casualties?

SC: Not many—we basically cared for the personnel in our hospital and nearby units.

SH: When you were in Korea and the battles were on-again, off-again, did rumors circulate?

SC: It was crazy. I know that they would say, "We know there's going to be a [battle]." It was a crazy war, from what we saw, because, if they said there'd be no fighting, the GIs would hang up their laundry and they were within vision of the North Koreans or the Chinese, no shooting. ... We heard this from the soldiers ... [and] some of our patients. Then, the Colonel might come in one day [and say], "There's going to be a push tonight," which meant, "Close the bar and let's wait to hear if we're going get casualties," or what[ever], but ... [they were] on-again, off-again type of battles.

SH: Did you get to meet anyone like Mark Clark or any of the people that we hear about in newsreels?

SC: No. I just knew that Mark Clark was the man, because, as I said, I had those two deliveries. That's the only reason I knew about him. [laughter]

SH: What about the controversy between Douglas MacArthur and Harry Truman?

SC: [We] had nothing. We were not even close.

SH: What did you hear? It had to be part of the conversation around that time.

SC: Not at all. That was way before. Remember, I mean, [during] that time, that was not a factor.

SH: Do you remember hearing the news of the end of the war in Europe?

SC: Well, that was way before.

SH: You were in medical school at this point. Were there any reactions or comments?

SC: You know, you think about things, but, here I am in Dallas, working my butt off, learning anatomy, physiology. ...

SH: Did you see any celebration in the streets?

SC: I don't recall. I do not recall.

SH: When the treaty was finally signed in Korea, were there any celebrations that you remember?

SC: Oh, we may have had a party or something. We were very near an Air Force station called K-2 and one of their famous pilots was a fellow by the name of Ted Williams. ... We had parties for the nurses, really, maybe two nights a week, Wednesdays and Saturdays, something like that. A lot of the Air Force would come over, their officers. We had no officers' club. Our code name was Elbow and we built a lounge and called it the Elbow Room. ... I don't remember any more, but all the three hospitals had code names and I know that the 25th Evac was Elbow and I can't think of anything else.

SH: Were there any activities that you did to keep yourself occupied?

SC: Well, no. This one friend of mine, who was one of my roommates and ended up here in Overlook Hospital, I never saw him again, but we used to play chess and it took days [to finish]. We told our roommates, "Don't touch the chess board," but, of course, we had nothing to do after July.

SH: The monotony may have been harder than the combat period.

SC: Well, then, my colonel got this crazy idea that we should teach in [the] Korean medical school in Taegu. So, now, they gave us .45s to carry. ... I put the bullets into the pistol, but I never cocked it. So, there was never a chance of that gun going off. We went to the medical school and I would talk and give my speech on OB or GYN. They'd sit there and smile and shake their heads and I knew they didn't know a darn thing about what I was saying. It was a total waste of time, but that's one of the things we did from July on. It was not very clever.

SH: What were the conditions like at the medical school in Korea at that point?

SC: I don't remember. We were in one lecture room. You know, you walked into a room and we didn't get a trip around the [campus]. We just went. We walked into a room, we talked, they smiled and I smiled back and I walked out.

SH: Did you ever consider staying in the military after your service?

SC: Never, not at all.

SH: After you got back stateside, when did you find out that you did not have to go back?

SC: Oh, very soon. I got a letter that they [had] assigned me to Camp Kilmer.

SH: Did you ever have to report there or go to work there?

SC: Oh, yes. I came home [in], I think I said February. In March, ... I report to Camp Kilmer [and] met a very nice man there. He was from [the] Midwest. His name was Bart Smith. We ran an OB service and I delivered a lot of babies in there. Oh, yes, I did OB\GYN at Camp Kilmer.

SH: How big was Camp Kilmer?

SC: Big.

SH: Was it?

SC: Oh, it was a POE, Point of Embarkation, but I was there from March almost until September. Then, my replacement came in, which was a pain in the neck, because they transferred me to Fort Monmouth, where I worked in the emergency room. That was a total waste, but I had no choice. ... On November the 12th, I went home and I signed my papers, "I do not want to re-up."

SH: How much time would you have off in a day when you were at Kilmer? Were you commuting back and forth?

SC: We worked every day and every other night. No, I lived in camp. I had a lovely apartment in Kilmer, three bedrooms.

SH: You were able to bring your family.

SC: Oh, yes. My wife, Allan and I were there and we had three bedrooms. They didn't have dryers in those days, because, I remember, we had a line outside where we could put the laundry. No, living in Camp Kilmer was fine. They had four movies, so, you [could] go to movies. It was fine. No, I enjoyed it. I just resented his arrival so early, and then, I had to go to Fort Monmouth, which is a bigger trip, and I had to do it daily.

SH: You were still living at Camp Kilmer.

SC: No. ... When they did that, we moved to Clifton, New Jersey.

SH: That is quite a hike. You were still working in the emergency room.

SC: Yes, [from] nine to four, and I think, one night a week, you had to stay and be the doctor in the emergency room, something like that. ... I didn't like that at all.

SH: How soon after that were you able to start your practice back up?

SC: Well, the day I got out of the service, which is November the 12th, 1954, ... roughly on November 1st, I had opened up my office. I had spoken to a doctor and, when I came in, I got home on that day [and] I called the office and they said, "Dr. Grossbard signed out to you. He'll be at this number. He's up in New York State someplace." November 12th was my wife's birthday, and so, I knew I was covering another doctor. We went out and, in those days, there was a very fine restaurant in Paramus called the 35 Club, non-existent now. So, we went to dinner with another couple to the 35 Club and, when we walked in, I said, "I'm Dr. Cohn. I have a reservation." "Oh, Dr. Cohn. Your office had called, call them immediately." So, I called my office. They said the patient of this other doctor was having a problem. I called her and I said to my wife, "Here I go," and I left the other two people and I went to work. So, I worked that night, and then, I called the doctor, told him the problem and, within twelve hours, he was back in New Jersey.

SH: Really?

SC: Yes. ... The woman was having a miscarriage.

SH: Then, you started your own practice.

SC: Right.

SH: Did your wife work outside of the home? Was she involved with your practice at all?

SC: Not at all, no, no, no. When I was interning and training, she had a job in Brooklyn, but, when we moved to New Jersey, no, she didn't work after that.

SH: Do you have any other children, besides Allan?

SC: I have three. Allan is the oldest. He was born in 1951. My middle child is Lee, my son. He was born in 1956 [and] he lives in Westfield. My daughter, born in 1959, lives in North Caldwell. So, I'm very lucky [that] my three children and six grandchildren are within forty minutes of me. So, I'm not moving.

SH: Were you a doctor who made house calls?

SC: Sure. That's the way you made a living in 1952, '54, both. Well, I have four months in 1952.

SH: When did house calls go out of style?

SC: My gut reaction would be '55-'56, somewhere around there, because, really, you just could do so much on a house call. ... It could have been even later, but I did it for a year. I remember, ... I think I stopped doing house calls around Labor Day '55.

SH: Did you ever have a partner or did you maintain a separate practice?

SC: In 1957, this Dr. Grossbard, whose name I mentioned before, we went into partnership and that lasted about fifteen years and it was a very successful [partnership].

SH: It is better to have a partner when you are an OB\GYN specialist?

SC: Of course. I would never go any place. In fact, I just remembered that, shortly after I went into practice, we wanted to take a weekend off or get a little break away. So, there was a ... hotel in West Orange. I lived at Passaic. West Orange was foreign. [The hotel was] called Goldman's and we went there for three days, like Friday, Saturday and Sunday. I left a telephone number and, fortunately, they didn't call me, but my personality is such [that] I could never do OB alone.

SH: What are you most proud of now that you had this very successful experience?

SC: I say, I grew up [and] I had a good life. I have three wonderful children, six wonderful grandchildren and I think I grew up in the good times. ...

SH: What are your passions now?

SC: My only passion right now, ... I have very severe arthritis of my shoulders and they told me I need replacements, which is eleven months [of rehabilitation], and I'm not going to do it. ... If I can't use my left, I'm a lefty, but, if they do this, I can't do it anymore. I can't turn a light bulb. So, my passion now is bridge. In fact, I'm supposed to play bridge in an hour. That's the way I kill an afternoon. TV has become a total disappointment. I used to be a TV nut and I used to be a movie nut, but I think movies are worse than ever and TV's worse than ever, and so, I've taken up reading. ... I have a computer and I play with that a lot. ... I try to figure out ways to pass time and that's it.

SH: Are your grandchildren in high school now?

SC: Well, my oldest is twenty-six and my youngest is eight. Each one of my children had children in succession. Allan, the oldest, had a boy and a girl. Then, Lee, number two, had a girl and a boy, and then, Nancy, number three, had a boy and a girl. Now, Jenna, the youngest, is either going to be, I think, ... eight. So, I go from eight to twenty-five or twenty-six.

NM: It sounds like you had a very good and happy life.

SC: I've had a wonderful life. I have no regrets.

SH: I thank you again for taking the time to speak with us.

SC: Yes. My only major disappointment [was that] my wife passed away in 2000 and we celebrated our fifty-third anniversary and that was it.

SH: You had a very good life partner.

SC: I did.

SH: We have been fascinated by your recollections of your experiences in Korea. You are the first medical doctor that we have spoken to.

SC: I can't think of anybody to refer [you to or] tell you to phone. Now, look, the inconvenience of being away from your family, it took Allan, my oldest, who takes after his mother, a long time, but, then, he never left me out of his sight.

SH: Thank you again, Dr. Cohn, for speaking with us today. This concludes the interview.

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Reviewed by Stephanie Darrell 2/2/05
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 2/14/05
Reviewed by Sidney Cohn 6/3/05