

EI-453

HENRY COHEN

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RESIDENCE: LONDON

AGE 15

US RESIDENCE: MURFREESBORO, TN

PASSAGE ON "THE BERENGARIA"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: SOUTHAMPTON

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service.  
I'm here today on April 8, 1994 with Henry Cohen.  
Mr. Cohen came from England in 1927 when he was  
fifteen years of age. Today we're here in the Ellis  
Island Oral History Studio, and Mr. Cohen is eighty-  
two years old. Well, I want to welcome you, and thank  
you very much for coming. I look forward to hearing  
everything you have to say.

COHEN: Thank you very much.

LEVINE: Okay. Let's start with your giving your birth date  
and the place where you were born.

COHEN: I was born March 28, 1912, in London, England. And to make it interesting, I was born in the Bloomsbury Hospital.

LEVINE: Did you live in London the entire time until you came here?

COHEN: Yes, I did.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Do you remember where you lived?

COHEN: Yes, I did. I lived at 146 Brunswick Buildings, Golson Street, Allgate, E1, London, England, which was in the heart of the Jewish section in White Chapel in London.

LEVINE: Could you describe what that section was like, White Chapel, when you lived there?

COHEN: Well, it was, uh, inhabited mostly by orthodox Jewish individuals. There was a synagogue on every corner. Incidentally, there was the most famous market in the world, Petticoat Lane, where there were barrels that sold everything from needles to elephants. There were Indian jugglers, there were snake charmers, and there were barrels that sold fruit and, uh, parasols and clothing and, but that was open strictly on Sundays.

Every store in that particular area was closed on Saturday. But it was, it was lively, it was exciting, and it was one of the most, excuse me, it was one of the most rewarding and rich environments that I'd ever been in in my life. In other words, it was part of the history, which has gone down. And I have a book that my cousin sent me from England, who was a barrister, of the early days of East End of London, and it really epitomizes that area in the time.

LEVINE: Can you remember what was your greatest enjoyment when you were there?

COHEN: Going to school. I went to a Jewish school. We had ten thousand students. There was a wall between the boys and the girls. It was part of the London county council educational system, but it was a parochial school due to the fact that Baron Rothschild had supported this school and wanted it to be designated as strictly as a parochial school. And it was one of the richest times in my life. And that was, in fact, one of the most interesting parts of my life.

LEVINE: Describe what school was like for you there, especially how it contrasted. Did you go to school

here as well?

COHEN: Yes, I did.

LEVINE: Yeah. ( Mr. Cohen clears his throat ) How it contrasted with . . .

COHEN: Well, there I was in grade school. There they called it standards rather than classes. And I went from the first standard to the eighth standard. And we had all male teachers. Every teacher, uh, wore a long, black gown, and the discipline was very strict. We had Hebrew lessons from eight to nine every morning, and the rest of the curricula was history and geography, and it was much more rigid than the American schools. And, in fact, I knew more there in grammar school than I did in the first two years in high school in Tennessee. Does that answer your question?

LEVINE: And how were the girls treated differently than the boys in England when you were there?

COHEN: I really don't remember. I don't think they were treated any differently. They were treated with respect. However, they were segregated, and the girls were, were in different classes. The boys had, uh,

classes, and, uh, in fact, I remember some of my teachers' names.

LEVINE: What were they?

COHEN: There was Mr. Amstel [ph], Mr. Heiser [ph], Mr. Isaacs [ph], and the principal was L.J. Bowman [ph].

LEVINE: Do you remember, do you think any one of them or more than one of them influenced you?

COHEN: I think all of them influenced me. They were very, very brilliant men. And, to me, they would have done just as well in college as they would in grammar school. They were, they were brilliant, they were intelligent, and they possessed something that really rubbed off on me. In other words, it helped me considerably in my later life.

LEVINE: Did you, did you have aspirations as a boy in London of what you wanted to do or be when you were a man?

COHEN: We were very poor. My father worked in a factory, my mother worked in a factory, and that was probably what I thought I would be doing. And when I got through grammar school, I graduated from grammar school I came home and my mother, her name was Sarah, she says,

"Henry," she had a cockney accent, she says, she was born in England, my father was born in Poland. She says, "Henry, what do you plan to do now?" I says, "I'm going to rest up for two weeks, and then I'll look for a position." She says, "You'll look for a position today." So I went to the labor exchange. It was like an employment, it was run by the government.

And I got a position in Hackney as an apprentice at seventeen shillings and sixpence a week. The equivalent was three-and-a-half dollars. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: What kind of apprentice?

COHEN: Making pipes and cigarette holders and ashtrays, and I learned how to operate the machines and how to, uh, bore the holes in pipes, and how to polish the briars, and how to make, in fact, I still have some, which I'm not supposed to have. I still have two or three that I, in my possession. I don't want to tell you how I got them, though.

LEVINE: Well, um, how old were you when you started that first position?

COHEN: Fourteen. And I was, when you're poor in England, or

you're in the lower income level, uh, you, in order to go to a higher school, you have to pay. And you can't afford it. Public high schools are not like high schools in this country. They may have changed since I left there, but, uh, all I can say is this, that, uh, you work, you go to school till you're fourteen, and that's it.

LEVINE: What was your father's name?

COHEN: Israel Nathan Cohen. I always tell everybody that's what they named the country after. Brilliant man, but was not, didn't have a formal education. Was a red hair with a red moustache, and a lot of common sense. And I even taught him how to write. You know, he knew how to write his name, but my brother, who was, when it came to it, my brother was only twelve. We taught him how to, my mother knew how to write. She went to grammar school. But my father didn't. Because in Poland there, if you were Jewish you were not allowed to go to a Polish school.

LEVINE: At what age did your father go to England from Poland?

COHEN: He was eighteen.

LEVINE: And do you know the circumstances?

COHEN: Yes, I do. He was inducted into the Russian Army. At that time, Poland was controlled by Russia. And the sergeant called my father a name, I'm not going into what it was, and he hit him in the head with a rifle butt. My father had a terrible temper, a redhead, you know. And he ran home. His mother gave him a bundle, and he went to Bremen, Germany, got on a boat, and landed in England. Couldn't speak a word of English. And he got a job as a tailor's presser. That's how he got to England.

LEVINE: And did you ever hear the story of how he met your mother?

COHEN: Yes, I did. She lived next door to him. And in those days, I don't know if you know what the word (Yiddish) means. (Yiddish) means that his father, and the other father, says, "Have I got a girl for you."  
( Dr. Levine laughs ) And that's the way it happened. Her name was Sarah Rebecca Rosenberg [ph], and, uh, beautiful woman, spoke beautiful English, and also had a temper. She's the one that would always perform the punishment on my brother and I, in case we did

something bad.

LEVINE: What would the punishment be?

COHEN: With a cane. She wasn't, as a matter of fact, I hate to say this, but I stole ten shillings and sixpence from her pocketbook one day, and my brother was little and I was little, and we played truant that day. We went to the cinema. We bought some pies. Spent the whole ten shillings and sixpence. We came home, my mother was waiting. Ten shillings, in those days, was a lot of money. It was like two-and-a-half dollars. So she said, "Did anybody take anything from my pocketbook?" My brother, who was a snake, said, "Yes, Henry took it." And she proceeded, she took a cane, she got me in the corner. I think I was twelve. I'm eighty-two now, and I can still feel it seventy-two years back. She says, "You'll never take anything from my pocketbook again," and I never did. So it didn't hurt me, you know, she didn't cane me that terrifically, but she reminded me I shouldn't do that.

LEVINE: Were your, was your family religious?

COHEN: Yes, it was. My father was very orthodox.

LEVINE: Do you remember . . .

COHEN: But he wasn't, he wasn't fanatically so. He was also a part-time hassan [ph], which is a cantor, you know. He had a terrific voice. You know, he could sing, he loved opera, and he loved to sing Hebrew melodies.

LEVINE: Do you . . .

COHEN: My mother wasn't as religious as my father. She looked the other way on certain things, you know. Her family was never as deeply, although her father was a rabbi, and my father's father was a rabbi, so we come from a long line of rabbis.

LEVINE: Um, do you remember any religious, uh, observances and celebrations, or . . .

COHEN: Yes.

LEVINE: From England?

COHEN: Yes. In the first place we, of course, we went in the synagogue regularly. And, uh, I was bar mitzvahed in a little synagogue on New Golson [ph] Street in London. And this is really interesting. You know, my father couldn't afford to have any affair for me. So

it so happened there was a gentleman who owned, uh, dress salons in Paris, Rome and, uh, London, who had come from that area, and had become very wealthy. And he decided he'd have his son bar mitzvahed in that little synagogue. And I was bar mitzvahed at the same time, and he invited my whole family and my relatives.

I had the best celebration. I don't think anybody in America. It was at the Royal Albert Hall, and I never expected that in a hundred years, but it was very, very nice. He had had his bar mitzvah in the east, in this particular little synagogue, and he invited the whole family.

LEVINE: What, was the bar mitzvah for you a rite of passage? I mean, did you experience it that way, that this was a turning point in your life?

COHEN: No. There was just, just to follow through. I don't think there was any turning point. I can tell you what the turning point was.

LEVINE: Uh, well . . .

COHEN: Later in life.

LEVINE: Tell me when we, we'll go chronologically, so when we

get to that point, then you tell. Okay. Um, so you had one brother who was three years younger than you.

COHEN: That's correct.

LEVINE: And is that the only sibling?

COHEN: No, I have a sister who lives in Nashville, Tennessee, Celia. She didn't come over till twelve years later. She was only four years old when I left England. We didn't see our parents for twelve years. We went to live with uncles. But I'll pursue that in a moment.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, now, uh, you were there during, uh, World War One.

COHEN: Yes.

LEVINE: Uh, what do you remember about, how did World War One affect you personally?

COHEN: Well, I remember it very well even though I was, I was born in 1912. The war broke out in 1914. Three of my uncles were in the British Army. I remember those. My Uncle George, my Uncle Lou and my Uncle, uh, Morris. They were all in the British Army. One of them got badly wounded, the youngest one, Uncle

George. I remember him. But I do remember when the German planes were coming over in World War One. I was five, six years old, and you could see them, and the Air Raid signs, and my mother grabbed me by the arm. My brother was, I think like a baby then. And she grabbed him. We lived five flights up in a tenement. We weren't the rich Jews you hear about. And she went down those stairs three or four at a time. We went into what they call a dugout. My father was like in the home guard. You know, he, and, uh, we stayed there. We also spent time in the subways, you know what I mean, in the tubes, they called it in England. To avoid being, there was ninety thousand people killed during World War One.

LEVINE: How long would you stay in these shelters?

COHEN: Until there was an all clear signal.

LEVINE: I mean, was it like days?

COHEN: Sometimes we'd stay overnight. No, no, it wasn't that length, because the planes, you could see. I'd look in the distance, you could see the planes coming over here. I'll never forget that. You know, there's certain things, even though you're little, that's so

vivid, you know.

LEVINE: And did you see, uh, bloodshed?

COHEN: No. I saw no bloodshed. I just saw my uncle who came over from, who's wounded in the Dardanells [ph], you know, against the Turks. He was shot in the leg, my Uncle George. He came over, and my mother made him a big meal. He had a, he was a sergeant in the British Army, a handsome guy. And, uh, that's the only bloodshed I saw. And he wasn't bleeding at the time.

LEVINE: Yeah. Do you remember conditions changing during the wartime, your living conditions?

COHEN: You mean, in World War One?

LEVINE: Yeah.

COHEN: No, I don't remember that. In other words, I was too little to appreciate it. I can't truthfully say that.

LEVINE: Could you describe the house you lived in?

COHEN: Well, we lived on the fifth floor in Brunswick Buildings. That was the name of our domicile. We had what they call a scullery. The scullery was a sink with a toilet and a little washbasin. We had two

rooms. The five of us slept in two rooms. We had plenty of room. We were happy. We had a big dining room table. That was the home. There was no bathtub.

Across the street was the Goldson Street Public Baths where we used to go twice a week, and you took a bath.

For threepence, which was six cents, you could take a bath, you couldn't turn the water on, because the man on the outside would turn the water on for you so you wouldn't waste water. And if you wanted more water, you hollered, "Hot water number twenty-three, please," and he turned the hot water on for you. Well, that's the way we bathed. It was a public baths. And they were all over the east end of London, you know, because nobody had bathtubs. However, we were a couple of mean kids. My brother and I, we'd stand on top of the bathtub, and we'd see an old Jewish man with a long beard, you know, kind of snoozing in the bathtub. We'd take a wad of wet paper and hit him in the head, which wasn't the nicest thing to do, but I thought I'd mention that.

LEVINE: ( she laughs ) Do you remember music, dancing, do you remember any kind of entertainment that you enjoyed?

COHEN: Yeah. We used to go to the cinema. We used to go to

the Jewish theater on Mylon Road, you know, where they had it, all in Yiddish, which I understood even as a little boy. And, uh, I have a cousin in London, he recently passed away. He was conductor of the Glasgow Symphony ORchestea, also was second violinist to the Royal Philharmonic and the London Philharmonic. And, uh, I used to go to his house and listen to him play the violin. I had another cousin, Julie, who played the piano, and another uncle. And I loved to have, well, we didn't have even radios then. You know, uh, we had to go and, in school they had orchestras, you know what I mean, in the Jewish free school. I also went to another, private, Gravel Lane, which was a little further away but, uh, it was half Jewish and half non-Jewish.

LEVINE: How were the relations between the Jewish and non-Jewish, uh, people? Do you remember anything about that?

COHEN: Well, there was a little friction occasionally. They used to throw rocks at me and say, "Hey, be my boy, go back," when I was six years old, "go back to Palestine." I didn't even know what . . .

LEVINE: Palestine.

COHEN: At six, you know. But we had fights. We had a lot of gangs. I belonged to a gang. You know, we had what they call the first arch-gang, the second arch-gang. We had arches near each building, in the Jewish world. There were some toughies there, too. And they'd come, they'd rough up an old Jewish man, and we'd go back and take planks with nails in them. We were really nice boys. I'm not proud of it, but it happened, that's all.

LEVINE: And, um, did you have, like, a best a friend?

COHEN: Oh, I had a lot of best friends. Jackie Springer, Jackie Dias [ph], uh, Schulman [ph], oh, I had, Hyman Pinkovsky [ph]. We had, we were running around, we had the best time you ever saw in your life. We played cricket. In other words, a whole group of us went to Harrow Alley where they used to sell British uniforms at different stores there, Cold Stream Guard uniforms and all that. We're playing cricket. Are you familiar with cricket? Make a little base. We have a bat, and one of us hit a ball and broke a big plate glass window. I left my jacket there. I left

the bat there. You never saw a group of, and there's a bobby right there blowing a whistle. I must have hit trenches. I would have beaten Jesse Owens at that time, you know. But that was an interesting time too, you know.

LEVINE: Did you have grandparents who were alive that you had any contact with?

COHEN: One grandfather. I remember him. Abromhom [ph] Moshe, Abraham Joseph, my grandfather on my mother's side. At some point, he died when he was fifty-three, and my grandmother died when she was forty-seven. On the other side, my grandfather was ninety-nine, and my grandmother was a hundred and one. But they died in Poland. I never saw them. In fact, my father had ten brothers and two sisters, so you can imagine. And all of them survived. Not all of them. The two sisters and one brother were killed in the Holocaust, but the rest of them came to the United States and they ended up in Tennessee. That's where they ended up.

LEVINE: Wow.

COHEN: But it's interesting how they came to Tennessee.

LEVINE: Yeah. Well, we'll get to that part after we go to . . .

COHEN: Okay. That is really, a point in saying how I ever came there.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, um, so, so you, uh, do you remember the specifics of how it was decided that your family would come to America?

COHEN: My family? They didn't come till twelve years later.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. So it was you and . . .

COHEN: I was the one that came originally. I'm the one that came to this place in '27.

LEVINE: How did, how did you happen to come?

COHEN: Well, I was working in the factory. My brother was going to grammar school, and my father says to me, "You're not going to work in any factory, and Mark is not going, he's going to America." Oh, we had written to our uncles, but I didn't know anything about America. I pictured like Texas or New York. Saw it in the movies, you know.

LEVINE: How do you spell the name of that town?

COHEN: M-U-R-F-R-E-E-S-B-O-R-O. It's named after a prominent family by the name of Murfree. In fact, there's a doctor there by the name, Murfree III is still living there, when I was there recently, you know.

LEVINE: And so that's where your mother's brother was, or your father's . . .

COHEN: No. My father's three brothers were in Murfreesboro, and one brother was in Nashville, and he was the initiator of bringing everybody over. My Uncle Henry, whose original name was Aaron, because in the Jewish faith you don't name somebody Henry, but he changed his name to Henry Aaron Cohen. And he's the one that started the whole migration.

LEVINE: So, so he was in communication with your father, and . . .

COHEN: No. My uncle, no, the one in Murfreesboro, Dave, who was his twin brother, didn't even look like twins, Dave, Harry and Max were three brothers, and they were all married, they all had children, and, uh, my uncle, my father says, "You're going to America, and we're going to get the papers for you, and you're going to

go live with one uncle, and Mark is going to live with another uncle. They want to divide you." They heard we were pretty rough characters. So, anyway, guess who was the one that sent us letters to support us to come over? It was Cordell Howell [ph] who was then, who became Secretary of State under Franklin D. Roosevelt. And that's, and he said, "You're going to America." So I told my boss, I said to him, uh, "I work for a company called Solomon & Goodman," who made S&G pipes and cigarette holders. I says, "I'm going to the United States in June." This was in April, I think. He said, "You're not going to America." He says, "You're going to be back here Monday morning just . . ." But I went, and I sent him a card from Murfreesboro. ( they laugh )

LEVINE: So, um, what did you take with you?

COHEN: What do you mean?

LEVINE: What did you, in your valise, or whatever you brought?

COHEN: Oh, we took clothes, and we took pictures of all kinds, and I had an album that I collected from World War One, you know, pictures like that. But we had, you know, we had adequate clothes and, uh, I think my

brother had one big, we had two, three suitcases.  
That was it.

LEVINE: Do you remember leaving?

COHEN: Yes, I do.

LEVINE: What was that like?

COHEN: Well, it makes me cry today. ( he is moved ) My  
Uncle Philip and several of my cousins, my Aunt Esther  
who got killed in World War Two, they all came to  
Southampton by train, and my mother cried.

LEVINE: It was just you and your brother.

COHEN: Yeah. He was twelve, and I was fifteen. And we said  
goodbye, and that was it. Got on the boat.

LEVINE: Did your mother and father give you any advice,  
or . . .

COHEN: Oh, yes. He told me to drink a bottle of, a little  
bottle of Johnnie Walker scotch. It will help me. I  
want to tell you about that.

LEVINE: Okay.

COHEN: And my mother gave me sweets, you know, chocolates and

everything, you know. And that was it.

LEVINE: So you went, from Southampton what was the name of the ship?

COHEN: The S.S. Berengaria, B-E-R-E-N-G-A-R-I-A. I'll never forget that. I was seasick for five days, after drinking that scotch.

LEVINE: ( she laughs ) Were you examined at all, even before you got on the ship, or when you got on the ship?

COHEN: I don't remember. Probably. There was nothing wrong with me. ( he laughs ) And my brother was healthy as an ox. In fact, today he's six foot three, and weighs two hundred and twenty pounds. He lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

LEVINE: Can you describe yourself as a fifteen-year-old going aboard that ship?

COHEN: Real skinny, a very skinny boy. A lot of hair, which I don't have today. And, uh, I didn't wear glasses. And I was, I had a typical cockney accent. I was well-dressed, because the uncles had sent me clothes, and they all sent my father money and clothes and everything else. So, uh, but I was, like I said, I

was very thin.

LEVINE: What was your personality like as a . . .

COHEN: Very shy. Very, uh, very . . .

LEVINE: Reticent.

COHEN: Strong, yes, extremely so. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: And was your brother that way, too?

COHEN: No. He was more, he changed, though. I became one way, and he, he was just full of, in fact, while I was sick on the boat, he'd go into the restaurant and eat whatever they had, and he'd come down. I'm landing in the bunk, and he'd tell me what he ate, and I threw up again, you know. And then the steward come down and say, "I say, young fellow you don't go aboard ship." He says, "I'll call the blooming doctor." I said, "Call whoever you want to." I says, "I can't get up there." After the fifth day I was fine, but that was it.

LEVINE: So you were actually traveling second class.

COHEN: That's correct.

LEVINE: And what was that like? Most of the people I interview were in steerage, so what was second class like?

COHEN: It was wonderful. We were, well, we had bunks, you know, my, I slept below, my brother slept above, but it was very nice. We had sinks and, the meals were, according to him, the meals were fantastic. The accommodations were great, and the sea was calm. That's why I couldn't understand why I got seasick.

LEVINE: Were you in a cabin with your brother and anybody else?

COHEN: No, just my brother and I. In fact, they bought the tickets. In fact, I heard that he even wanted to buy me first class tickets, but my father said no. He says, "Second class is good enough." They were well-heeled, as far as financially, you know.

LEVINE: So what happened? Do you remember the boat coming into, do you remember the Statue of Liberty?

COHEN: Oh, yes. I remember somebody says, "Oh, there's a . . ." I says, "Oh, my God, here we are!" So we were detained for no particular reason, but, uh, when

I came onto this Ellis Island they had this committee dressed in uniforms. And I walked in, I told my brother, "Don't you open your mouth," I said, "because I'm going to do all the talking." I said, "I don't know what they want." So I go into this room, and they call my name, and this red-faced rugged-looking tough-looking guy looks at me and he said, well, first an interpreter starts speaking to me in Yiddish. So I says, "Why are you talking to me in Yiddish?" I says, "I speak better . . ." He had an accent. I says, "I speak better English than you do." He said, "Well, you're, it's marked on your, you're of Hebrew origin."

I was born in London, you know. So then the guy says to me, "Why are you coming to the United States?" I says, "To get an education." He says, "Can't you get an education in England?" I says, "Yes, but when you go any further you have to pay for it, and my father couldn't afford it." "Did you bring any money with you?" I said, "Yes, I did, sir." He said, "How much did you bring?" I said, "I brought a hundred pounds."

My father told me to send it right back to him. There were five hundred dollars, and that was like. He says, "Can I see it?" I says, "Here it is." I showed it, and then he starts reading. He says, "Ah-

ha! The Mayor of Murfreesboro. He got a telegram, the Mayor of Nashville, Senator Cordell Hull [ph], congressmen, representatives." He says, "Your uncle must have a lot of influence down there in Tennessee." He says, "All right, boys, on your way to Tennessee." And that was it.

LEVINE: Well, do you know why you were brought to Ellis Island?

COHEN: No. That I still don't know to this day.

LEVINE: And how long were you detained there?

COHEN: I wasn't detained at all, hardly any time. I was on the boat. They kept me on the boat overnight.

LEVINE: I see. So, um, so this questioning was over very quickly.

COHEN: Very limited, very limited, yeah.

LEVINE: Do you have an impression of Ellis Island for the brief time you were there?

COHEN: Yeah. It looked like a bunch of, uh, cattle pens. That's what it looked to me like. And there was, uh, I never saw such a, there were thousands of people

there. And they had detained several old Jewish men, and one of them was crying, sitting next to me. And he says to me, "Oy vey is me." He says, "Oh, my God." He says, "I don't know why they're holding me." You know, he says, "The halazun [ph] in Boston is all (Yiddish)." He had a son in Boston that was going to see him, but he doesn't know where he is. So I told him not to worry. I spoke to him in Yiddish, and I calmed him down, you know. I'll never forget that. He didn't look that old, but he had a long, black beard, and I spoke to him. I relaxed him. At fifteen I was a psychologist.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

LEVINE: So when you were released from Ellis Island, what happened next?

COHEN: When I was released, we got our suitcases, and we still had a port manteau at the boat. You know what a port manteau is? It's a big trunk. That's what, in England they call it port manteau. And, uh, we had to get that. But my Uncle Dave came on board Ellis Island with Frank Houston, who was then president of

the Chemical National Bank of New York City, and was a native of Woodbury, Tennessee, and my uncle knew his whole family, so he went by and got him because he thought there was a reason, you know, but we were already released, so.

LEVINE: What was your uncle doing that he knew so many influential people?

COHEN: He owned a big department store, that's all. He was just a, my uncle had a, if he'd had a formal education, he could have been anything, my Uncle Dave. My father wasn't as aggressive. My father was more of the religious type, you know. He was a tailor, and he worked fourteen, sixteen hours a day, fingers like this. But my Uncle Dave knew everybody. In other words, when he wanted something done, he went to the banker or he went to the congressman or he went to the senator, and he got it done. He was terrific. And my Uncle Henry was the same way. I'll tell you about Uncle Henry.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, how did, did Uncle Dave come to New York?

COHEN: Yes, yes. He came to New York to meet us.

LEVINE: Would you remember the meeting with, you didn't know him before this?

COHEN: I never saw him in my life.

LEVINE: So what was the meeting like with this uncle?

COHEN: But he was nearsighted. He was taller than my father, and he was more heavier. He weighed a hundred and ninety. My father weighed a hundred and forty. They didn't even look like brothers, let alone twins. And, uh, I never saw him. Then he got sick. We were staying at the Aberdeen [ph] Hotel on 33rd Street for two or or three days. He didn't feel good. So he gave both of us ten dollars, and he says, "Boys, go out and have a good time." He said, guess what? Can you imagine we went to Times Square, tea and donuts and an apple. We went to Coney Island and went on the subways, you know, and everything, like. At fifteen, we'd never been to New York in our lives, but we, we went around.

LEVINE: Do you remember what struck you as different or unusual your first few days?

COHEN: Well, the buildings, the talk, the, the, uh, speed of

everything. You know, England was much, a different atmosphere entirely. There was nothing like it, you know. It was a new world. Just like I would describe it as a new world, that's all.

LEVINE: And, and do you remember what you expected, and what you found, and was there any difference?

COHEN: Well, New York was what I expected.

LEVINE: It was?

COHEN: Texas was what I expected.

LEVINE: Oh. ( she laughs )

COHEN: But Murfreesboro was not what I expected. That's all I can tell you.

LEVINE: ( she laughs ) Yeah, okay. All right. So, so you, you and your brother went around for a few days, exploring on your own.

COHEN: We went everywhere. And he gave us more money, you know what I mean. We brought him food, you know. I said, "Let him lay there. We'll go out and have a time." He didn't know it.

LEVINE: What, how did your uncle strike you? I mean, what kind of a man was he?

COHEN: Well, he's quite different than my father. He had a, he spoke with no accent and, uh, he was a very intelligent individual but very firm. You know, he was the type of man he told you to do something, he, you'd do it, and that's all. We learned later about that.

LEVINE: Okay.

COHEN: But he was a very strong individual.

LEVINE: So you were there for a few days, and then your uncle got better?

COHEN: Yes, after the third day, and then he said, "We're going back to Murfreesboro." So we got on the train. He had a sleeping compartment for us, you know. And we drove, it was twenty-four hours, and we ended up in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. We had to cross the railroad tracks to get to a little shack of a station, and it was an old rickety cab that took us to the house. But did he have a house! Brand new, you know, the most gorgeous house I ever saw. You know, we never lived

in anything like that. I had the whole upstairs to myself. Cedar-lined closets with four bedrooms, my own bathroom, and they had black maids, you know, and they didn't keep a kosher house. We did, in England.

And that's an interesting thing. ( he laughs ) 'Cos the next morning we went into the kitchen, into the breakfast nook. Oh, yeah, as long as, you never saw anything like it. The table would seat twenty people.

And the black maid, Hattie, brought in hot biscuits, uh, cornsticks, uh, eggs, bacon, molasses, I forget. Coffee, tea, everything, milk. I looked at the bacon and, you know, we never ate that in our lives. And my brother looked at it. So my uncle looked at me, and he says, "Look. Boys, you don't have to eat that bacon. I don't either." He says, "My sons do." He says, "You eat what you want, and we do not keep two sets of dishes." You know that, are you familiar with that?

LEVINE: Yes.

COHEN: He says, "We only keep one set of dishes, and if you plan to eat, you eat, or else, because the only closest kosher butcher is thirty-two miles away." So we adjusted. And then my brother went to live with

another uncle who had no children, he and his wife. And he had a ball. You know, they treated him, because they had no children, he was the only one, they treated him like their own son. Now, Uncle Dave, on the other hand, was a good guy. But the first thing he handed me was a vacuum cleaner. I'd never even seen one. He says, "I want you to vacuum every room in this house. And also, when you get through with that, I want you to help my wife make beer and wine in the basement." I says, "What the hell is this?" That's exactly what I said. So I vacuumed every room, you know, and cleaned, dusted and everything like that. And, uh, I did the, uh, helped crush the grapes and make the, you know, it was Prohibition. He had tons of that stuff. He even had this white corn, you know, the illegal, illicit liquor, you know. White Lightning. So I was there about a week and I wrote my father a letter. Dear Dad, please send me money to come back to England. I didn't want to stay. Now, my aunt was a different person, his wife, my Aunt Jeanette. She kind of cooled it. He had a terrible temper. And, uh, but I lived at his house for four years and, you know, it adjusted. I worked in his store, and, uh, I was a

terrific salesman, and he appreciated it. And that was it.

LEVINE: Do you know where the turning point came to, uh, your being ha--, wanting to stay?

COHEN: I got a letter from my father. Dear Boys, Henry and Mark, You boys wanted to go, he says, you'll have to stay, and you'll have to work things out. That's what he wrote. Somebody wrote the letter for him. So then we went to high school, and we didn't have to stay in the house, and my brother started playing football. He was a big guy, and I start extracurricular activities in the high school. And then we'd go to Nashville. We had a lot of British relatives. My Aunt Janie, and my bunch of cousins. So we got on a bus and go to Nashville and stay there for a couple of weeks. And then I'd go to Uncle Henry's house. Oh, did he have a house! Uncle Henry had a chain of furniture stores throughout middle Tennessee. And his son still lives in Nashville, eighty-eight years old. My cousin Percy. Isn't that a nice name? Percy Cohen. Go ahead. Ask me anything else.

LEVINE: Did, uh, your brother Mark stay with your Uncle Henry?

Which uncle was . . .

COHEN: No, he stayed with Uncle Max.

LEVINE: Uncle Max.

COHEN: The bachelor, who married late in life. And then Mark went to Nashville and got a job as a head bookkeeper.

He was only a youngster, and also went to business school. But he was a whiz in math. You know, if he'd have gone, like that. But Mark made good money, and then I turn around and work my way through, uh, I went to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. I didn't have any money. Uncle Henry sent me twenty dollars a month to cover everything. And I delivered dry cleaning. I worked in a Greek restaurant washing dishes. I worked at Baker's shoe store on Saturdays.

But we had a lot of friends, and it was a very interesting two years at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.

LEVINE: What were you studying there?

COHEN: I was pre-law, and then I went to law school at Vanderbilt in Nashville. We had twenty-six in our class. And this is the time I said that Pauline

LaPon, who is Albert Gore Junior's mother, sat next to me, and Albert Gore Senior, who was a senator, sat three rows down. And she performed against me in moot court. Brilliant girl. And she worked her way through, she was taking care of a blind sister and worked as a waitress at the Andrew Jackson Hotel in Nashville. That's Albert Gore's mother. But I went through there, and it was an interesting three years.

LEVINE: Well, did we reach the turning point?

COHEN: Yes, we did. I felt like I was accomplishing something. I was getting somewhere. I was, I got a job as a radio announcer on WSN, the grand ole' opera station. Uh, I got twenty-five dollars a week for three nights a week, to broadcast the news. It was like this, only in a little booth. And Dinah Shore was then Fannie Roshaw [ph], and she sang at the radio station. And while I was at Vanderbilt, I have a cousin who lives in California, Celia Cohen, who married an oil millionaire by the name of Victor Abalese, from Czechoslovakia. He bought an oil company in Nashville, and I worked for him while I was going to Vanderbilt. He had, he not only had the franchise for Quaker State Oil for Kentucky and

Tennessee, but he took care of all these oil furnaces, and he gave me a job on Saturdays and Sundays, five hours, it was an hour. He gave me a lot of money then, to, uh, take care of complaints, if anybody needed a mechanic or anything like that. So one night he says to me, "You're gonna speak at the temple tomorrow." Am I going too far?

LEVINE: No, you're fine.

COHEN: He says, "You're going to speak at the temple tomorrow night." I says, "What are you talking about?" He had a gorgeous library, and one time he was, what was he, ambassador for Norway, even though he was a Czech. Not an ambassador, but like a representative in Norway, of Norway, in Mexico City, and that's where he heard about this place in, and he married, my cousin was a beautiful girl. She was another British, that's my Uncle Hyman's daughter. And he says, "You're going to speak tomorrow night." He says, "The first prize is a hundred dollars, seventy-five and then fifty." He says, "You might as well try." I says, "What am I going to speak about?" He says, "Well, I've already selected the subject for you." He says, "Walter Rattenau [ph]," who was the Jewish prime minister in

Germany, and the Vicount REdding, who was the viceroy of India, his name was Lord Redding. So we did research, and the next night there was an audience of about five hundred people. There were sixteen contestants, and I won the second prize of seventy-five dollars. So that was like a million bucks, you know.

LEVINE: Had you spoken, well, I suppose in school you did.

COHEN: In high school. I started, I had an elocution teacher, a real southern aristocrat, Mrs. Gates-Chapman [ph]. She's the one that developed my speech, even though when I was in grammar school in England the first thing I remember reciting was Mark Anthony's speech, friends, Romans, countrymen. And I never forgot that, and that's the first thing I recited in high school. And as a result they put me on the, and then at the University of Tennessee my professor was Dr. August Trisiver [ph], a Yale graduate, and I was, I debated against the City College of New York, Western Reserve, Case Institute, uh, Berea College in Kentucky, the University of Louisville, Ohio State. We had three individuals that represented. One was Dr. Burn Williamson [ph], who was my roommate at the

university, a dyed-in-the-wool Baptist, but he's been a friend of mine to this day, uh, in high school. In fact, I wrote all the love letters for his wife who passed away, you know, Francis Baxter. See, I developed years ago Guillien-Barre [ph] syndrome, which is a rare virus disease. I only speak with my lower lip. You'd never do that. I have a bilateral paralysis of the face. But he couldn't write love letters. So he said, "Henry, write." And he did. So he came, he was an orthopedic surgeon, he came from Birmingham, Alabama with his wife when I was in critical condition, from Birmingham. Here's a man with practice. And he stayed there for three days until I got out of the critical situation. And he was telling my wife, he says, "You know him? The one that wrote the love letters," and so-and-so. And that was it. But we've been friends now for, since 1927. We went to high school, we debated together. We went to the university together. He went to medical school in Memphis, and I went to law school. And he hated Jews originally, and he changed, because he didn't know anybody. He came from the community of Blackmen, Tennessee, population one hundred. He didn't know anybody. But we, we're still good friends. And he's

still a Baptist, and I'm still Jewish, and that's the way it works.

LEVINE: Wow. So how did you meet your wife?

COHEN: My brother was a major with the fourth army division in Pine Camp, New York, which is now in Watertown, New York. It's now Camp Drum. He volunteered for E.S. Service in 1940. They sent him to Fort Knox, Kentucky. From there they sent him to a tank division in, uh, Watertown, New York, which is seventy-five miles from Syracuse. He came to Syracuse with another, at that time he was with another officer, and he was, it was a blind date. He was supposed to go out with his wife's sister, which he got, with his wife's sister, so she got sick, so they substituted his wife. He calls me up one day, he says, "Henry, I'm getting married." I says, "What are you talking about? It's wartime." This is '43. He hadn't gone overseas yet. So he says, "I want you to be my best man." So my sister and I went to, uh, Syracuse, and he got married in Syracuse to this little girl, and that was in '43. Three years later, no, after the war he moved back to Syracuse for a while, and his wife introduced me to my wife. They wanted me to go out

with him, and I was going with another girl from the Bronx for five years. But then I, my wife was a hundred and twenty pounds, you know, a beautiful woman, and so forth. So Henry got enamored and got married, that's the way it happened. I never heard of Syracuse. Sometimes I wish I never had, with a hundred and eighty-nine inches of snow.

LEVINE: What was your wife's maiden name?

COHEN: Resnick.

LEVINE: Resnick?

COHEN: R-E-S-N-I-C-K. In Russian it means butcher. Her father was born in Kiev.

LEVINE: So, um, then what, after, you became a lawyer?

COHEN: That's correct.

LEVINE: And you married.

COHEN: Practice in Tennessee.

LEVINE: And you stayed in Tennessee.

COHEN: Right. But then she decided, after I got sick several years ago, that she'd like to move back to Syracuse,

which was a mistake I made, but sometimes you do what your wife wants. Because I couldn't walk for three-and-a-half years. I couldn't bite, I couldn't close my eyes. They expected, I was on an iron lung for a week, so, you know, see, I'm starting to get some wrinkles, but I couldn't walk, I couldn't bite, I couldn't close my eyes or anything like that. It was very rare, so it nearly killed me. And that was the, so I couldn't practice as much as I did, that's all. See, I used to mumble. I couldn't even pronounce anything, you know. But that's the fortunes of war.

LEVINE: Yeah. How many children did you have?

COHEN: You mean, my wife?

LEVINE: You and your wife.

COHEN: I didn't have any. My wife had two. In fact, my oldest daughter lives near Hudson, New York, and she's working on a doctorate. She, uh, was teaching there, too. She has, you know, a fellowship there.

LEVINE: What is her name?

COHEN: Marcia Magolin [ph], M-A-R-C-I-A. She has two children. She has a boy who just turned eleven, and a

daughter that's going to be seventeen. And this is my youngest, Susan Audine [ph]. Her husband is a physician in New Jersey, and she has two. And, uh . . .

LEVINE: Yeah, show me afterwards.

COHEN: And, uh, Jason Audine [ph], and Lauren Michelle Audine [ph]. Beautiful kids. And her husband is an endocrinologist. This young lady spent a year with my cousin in England, and she is a speech therapist and an audiologist. And my other daughter majored in language. She speaks Italian, French and Spanish fluently, and won a scholarship to the University of Nice, and spent one year, and was all over Europe. You know, both of them had been to Greece, they've been to Turkey, they've been, I've never had that experience like they have.

LEVINE: What are you most proud of in your life?

COHEN: My children and my wife, and I'm proud of what I accomplished based on the fact that I came from such humble beginnings, you know. My father would never have the opportunity, even in England, but yet his brothers came to America and Uncle Henry did

exceptionally well, and everybody knew him in the whole state. He dressed in Palm Beach suits and Panama hats and a little black tie like the Texans wear, had a little trimmed moustache, and he'd go into the circus with his grandchildren, and he'd wave his hat. And if he objected to a politician, he'd put it right over his stall, vote for the other guy. In addition to that, he had, uh, his ads all over Nashville with his picture on it, and below, H. Cohen, founder, ask your grandmother where she bought her furniture. But it's not there any more. In other words, the sons have sold out and they're scattered everywhere, you know. California, Texas, everywhere.

LEVINE: Well, what difference do you think it made to you having lived your first fifteen years in London and then coming here? How did that affect you later on?

COHEN: I became self-reliant. In other words, as children, you know, being, coming from that background, we learned to appreciate what we had. We didn't complain if we didn't have a certain type of food on the table. We didn't complain if we didn't have certain clothes. Toys, we never had. We had one tricycle between us. But my, her, I wish you'd see that house. It

covered, it's gorgeous. In fact, excuse me. She's remodeling the whole place. I wish you'd see her. And her children. "Mommy, I don't like this," or "I don't like that." And, you know, I shouldn't say anything, but it bothers me, you know, to think that the three of us as children accepted what we had, we respected our parents, and God forbid we should say anything bad against them. They didn't have to whip us. My father would just look at me, and that was enough. You know what I mean? But then my uncles, I've got to give Uncle Dave credit for a lot, you know, the discipline. You know, he, because I wasn't a bad boy anyway, you know what I mean, but, uh, my uncles and my father and my mother were terrific examples, you know. They knew what values were. They knew what kindness was. My father would give charity. He didn't care who it was, whether he could afford it or not. He felt sorry for everybody. That was it.

LEVINE: Were there any other attitudes or values that you think you, were ingrained in you from your family?

COHEN: I respect the other fellow regardless of what religion he has, providing he respects mine. I, uh, values of honesty and values of integrity, uh, love, affection.

All the attributes that go with a decent human being, that's all. And there was nothing to, I was on the street a lot of times, because they both worked. My mother and father worked till late. So I could have been a gang member. I could have gone out like some of these guys with guns. But in those days it wasn't like that, you know. You had bad people, but nothing like today. Today is a different era, a different time.

LEVINE: Um, let's see. Well, is there anything else that you can think of that has to do with your being an immigrant and living out your life here?

COHEN: In what respect?

LEVINE: Um, I guess, I guess I really did ask that question about any, um, ways that being an immigrant affected you personally, affected your personality, affected your . . .

COHEN: I don't know. I really can't answer that. I never consider myself an immigrant. In other words, I adjusted very rapidly. When I went to high school in Murfreesboro, I was part and parcel of the group, and nobody treated us any differently there. In other

words, the only prejudice I saw that was against blacks, but we were the only two boys of Jewish faith, and they knew it, you know. Nobody ever made a remark, nobody ever castigated us for anything. We had made a lot of friends. I had one fight the entire time I was there. I was in the basement of the high school, and my uncle had bought me a brand new plaid brown suit. And this fellow came up to me, Mark, my brother was a little fellow, and knocked the lunch out of his hand. I said, "Why did you do that?" "Because I felt like it." I took my glasses off, and I butted him with my head. I knocked him down. He missed the pipe that much. It could have killed him. The coach of the football team came down, grabbed us both by the shoulders, and said, "All right, boys, the show's over." But what was worse, there was grease on the floor, and my uncle had just bought me this suit. You know I fell, and uncle had a terrible temper. It so happened I went home and I explained it to him. But Uncle Max happened to be there, who was the mildest one of the bunch. He said, "Dave, you leave the poor guy alone. He's told you the truth. He hasn't done anything. I'll buy him another one. Throw this one away." And that was it. But those are little

incidents that I don't forget, you know what I mean. I thought he was going to kill me, you know. Actually, I was protecting my brother. He couldn't have hit him. But yet that guy wouldn't have done it today. My brother was a, weighs about two-twenty. He was badly wounded overseas. He was a tank commander. He was in combat from '43 to '45. He got wounded near Cologne. And half of his tank battalion were Chicago Jews, and half of them lost their lives in the attack against us. Then they made him military governor, because he spoke Yiddish, of Hofmeister [ph] and Witsenhausen [ph], two German towns. He was the military governor of those towns until the war ended. And he sent me over some, a whole big, uh, suitcase full of mementos. A Turkish jeweled sword, which was, in a scabbard. He sent me a Luger. He sent me a rifle. He sent me all kinds of Nazi emblems. He said, "You can keep them." When he came home, he took them back. ( they laugh ) That was the end of my mementos, you know. But, uh, a handsome looking guy, he and my sister both. My sister will be seventy-five in September, and he'll be seventy-nine. We're all getting old.

LEVINE: Now, your sister, uh, came over much later.

COHEN: She came over in '38, and I didn't see my family. My mother, we bought a house, you know, in '38. 'Cos they were cheap then. What did I pay for the house? Twenty-two hundred dollars. Then we built another one for them, for thirty-four hundred dollars. It was a brick house with three bedrooms, a basement, a porch. We paid two hundred and eight dollars for the lot. We sold it when we left there for, it was twenty-eight thousand dollars. And when I went back recently a major had bought it for eighty-six thousand dollars, 'cos Murfreesboro is now, from sixty-one hundred is ninety-eight thousand.

LEVINE: So did your mother and father then come over, too?

COHEN: In '38.

LEVINE: They all came, uh-huh.

COHEN: My mother's buried in Nashville, and my father's buried in Nashville. All my uncles are buried in Nashville. It's a big Jewish cemetery down there, you know.

LEVINE: Well, how is this period in your life, this . . .

COHEN: Tranquil. That's all I can say, I'm not doing anything. I read a lot, I write. I, uh, visit the children, you know. I visit them, like, two or three times a year. My other daughter just, just ruined herself. She just fell on the ice recently. She's got a disc that has gone against the nerve, and she can hardly walk, taking her son skating. But that's got nothing to do with my life. ( he laughs ) But this is, right now, at eighty-two, what can I say? I read, I travel a little bit. See, I had some medical problems. I had heart surgery. I had a new hip put in. I just had laser surgery in my eyes. So you ask me, you know, if I can get around pretty good, then I consider myself lucky. And my mind is clear. I read a lot. As long as my mind continues, then I'll feel happy, that's all.

LEVINE: What was it like visiting Ellis Island after so many years?

COHEN: Fascinating. I thought, like when I went around all the, I never saw so many Henry Cohens.

LEVINE: On the Wall of Honor.

COHEN: On the wall. Oh, I, we got the whole tape of the thing, and she's taking the tape now, you know. But I thought it was, you know, it was just like a dream. You say, "Was I here?" Can't be. "Was I here?" Then I see all those pictures, you know. I only wish that some of those six million, I was listening to that program the other night how Roosevelt, who I admired, refused to even allow him to come in. They finally, after Henry Morgenthau decided to press Roosevelt, then they let in a few hundred thousand. But I'm not going into that. We all have our ups and downs, I guess. I don't think he was knowledgeable then either. I think his aides, the state department was a very biased group at the time.

LEVINE: Well, I think maybe this is a good place to end. We've been talking for an hour.

COHEN: Have we?

LEVINE: Yeah. ( she laughs ) It went fast. So I want to thank you very much. I'm talking with Henry Cohen. We're here at Ellis Island, and it's April 8, 1994. Mr. Cohen is eighty-two years old, or eighty-two years young.

COHEN: I'd rather, I prefer that.

LEVINE: Okay. And I want to thank you very much. This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service, and I'm signing off.

COHEN: Thank you.

LEVINE: Thank you.