

## **Oral History of George Cohen, Esq.**

This interview is being conducted on behalf of the Oral History Project of The Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. The interviewer is Roger Pollak, and the interviewee is George Cohen. The interview took place at Mr. Cohen's residence on Wednesday, October 13, 2021. This is the first interview.

MR. POLLAK: George, you can start off by saying your full name and where you were born, and then let's move into talking about your family a little bit, about where your ancestors came from, any immigration story that you want to share, and then history of your most interesting childhood.

MR. COHEN: Thank you, Roger. First, I want to say what I told your dad when he called me that, not having argued a case before the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit for about 25 years now, I viewed this as nothing less than a great honor. And the added attraction is having you as Steve's son and my former colleague and partner makes it all the more pleasurable. Let the record show I'm 87 years old and trying to resurrect what happened to me so many years ago is a bit of a fascinating challenge.

MR. POLLAK: Well the great thing is there's nobody around to question whatever you want to say.

MR. COHEN: This is true, but I have fact checkers in the family. Both my son Bruce and daughter Julie, as you know, are in the entertainment industry, and they will also be checking.

MR. POLLAK: And note that once it's transcribed, the transcription will come back to you, and you can share it with them, and you can make whatever changes you wish or deletions or additions.

MR. COHEN: That is a sine qua non, a quid pro quo! Thank you.

So, for the record my name is George H. Cohen. I have rarely used my middle name Herbert because I like initials better. I was born on January 3, 1934, in Brooklyn, New York, and lived in Brooklyn for the first six years of my life. Then my folks moved to a summer resort town about 30 miles from New York City named Long Beach, Long Island, on the Atlantic Ocean. I grew up there until I left for college at age 17 years. But Long Beach was a fascinating town because the winter population of 10,000 people increased manyfold every summer because the ocean and its lovely beaches was a great attraction. We had summer residents, weekly renters, and daily visitors. It created quite a fascinating environment in terms of my summer employment, which we'll discuss.

MR. POLLAK: Great.

MR. COHEN: So you also asked me about my family. That was my dad, Leonard, known as Len, my mom, Gladys, and my younger sister Jane, four years my junior. My grandparents also offered a fascinating story. I can show you a four-generation photo from my father's side. That's me sitting on the lap of my dad. I am about four years old. Dad was 32 when I was born, so he's about 36. His dad, my grandfather, was an amazing character named J. Moe Cohen, who I met on many occasions. He was probably then in his mid- to late-80s. The remaining person is my great-grandfather, who I barely knew, except to have had the good fortune of being photographed with him in Brooklyn at some point in my life in the 1930s.

MR. POLLAK: It's an extraordinary photograph, George. Let the record reflect that it's a black-and-white photo of the four people who George described, with George in the middle looking like he's about age 2 ½ and his great-grandfather with a very long white beard and of advanced age and looking as if he came from Eastern Europe a long time ago.

MR. COHEN: The most fascinating story about my grandfather, J. Moe Cohen, is he came alone from London, probably originally from Poland. I don't know if his parents preceded him here or followed him here, but all I do know of the story is that he arrived at Ellis Island circa 1870 at age 11 or 12. The Immigration Officer asked for his name, and he said my name is J. Moe Kaley, to which the Immigration Officer asked him what his religion was. He said I'm Jewish. The Officer said Kaley sounds too much like Kelly. Kelly is an Irish name, so you're "Cohen." In fact, that seems to be an accurate story because my father's brother at some point in his life chose to go back to the name Kaley. My family stayed with Cohen even though my dad was a sportswriter and at that time in history it might have been more desirable to be Kaley. Out of respect to my family, I have remained "Cohen."

Now that story, Roger, is outdone by my mother's side. My mom, Gladys Winner, was born in the United States. Her father, Louis, was also born in the United States, which was a little unusual for a Jewish person in those days. My mom's maternal mother was Lutheran. She died during childbirth a year or so after my mother was born. So, as an aside, in Israel

today, I am not Jewish because you must be 100% Jewish on your mother's side. What this also means is that I am one-quarter Lutheran. But that fact was not disclosed to me by my parents until I was 42 years old! When I inquired why they waited for 42 years to tell me, my mom said there didn't seem to be any right time to tell me. My wife Phyllis, who was with me at the time, responded that it would have been the "right" time years before when we were naming our first son Bruce after whom we thought was my grandmother Bella. To me, this entire incident was humorous, not traumatic. So my reply to my parents was if you had told me sooner, I might have been in Theta Beta Chi, a Christian fraternity at Cornell, but instead, I was in Tau Epsilon Phi.

MR. POLLAK: So going back for a moment, your mom's dad's last name was Winner?

MR. COHEN: What genes I acquired indirectly through my mom's father, it's quite extraordinary. He was about 6 foot 3, red hair, rugged, a long-distance swimmer, and when he got together with my other grandfather, J. Moe Cohen, who was about 5 foot 5 and 135 pounds and a bookkeeper in the New York City Diamond District, it was quite a scene to behold. Grandpa Winner was as close to an atheist as you could get, and he was very influential during the early part of my life. In marked contrast, J. Moe was a practicing Jew and became a bigshot in the Masons. He was known affectionately as "Right Worshipful." Grandpa Lou died before I left for college. Grandpa J. Moe was alive and in his mid-80s when I left for college. In my second year at Cornell, in 1952, at the fraternity house I

posted the first letter he wrote me that year. It read something like “My Dearest George, I know you are dealing with the challenges caused by the vicissitudes of life and you may find it hard to acclimate yourself to all the ambiguities that you will be confronting. Please understand I have total confidence that you will be able to do so.” The letter was penned in beautiful handwriting worthy of being read by all my friends. And that was Grandpa J. Moe.

MR. POLLAK: So he came to the U.S. when he was eleven, went through Ellis Island, then his father, who’s in the picture that you showed me, did they come together?

MR. COHEN: They apparently did not arrive at Ellis Island together, but I don’t know why.

MR. POLLAK: Got it. So he got here at some point and lived the balance of his life in Brooklyn?

MR. COHEN: Yes. Well that’s another beautiful story. My grandfather’s home was given the name “Hotel No Dough,” and there was a definitive explanation which meant anybody in our family who is homeless or had no money or was fighting with their parents and needed another place to live was welcome at Hotel No Dough. My father actually was a mentor to a cousin of his who was probably a young teenager when my dad was in college. That cousin, Eddie, moved to Washington as an adult and became an “uncle” of mine who befriended Phyllis and my children.

Bottom line, I had an amazingly interesting group of characters in my immediate family whom I loved at the time and even more now thinking back about them.

MR. POLLAK: So J. Moe came over when he was 11 or 12. What year was that?

MR. COHEN: I'd say 1875 or so.

MR. POLLAK: That was a better time to come than later. My relations also came prior to the Second World War.

MR. COHEN: Not enough was told to me about all of those events, which was sad. On the other hand, I know a lot about Leonard, or Len, as he was affectionately called. He had an amazing life at the time, and in retrospect, it's even more amazing as I've done some of the research to find out more about him. He was born in Brooklyn in 1902 and went to Boys High. I knew nothing about Boys High, but a lot of people knew that it was a great place to go. And then he went to NYU, and he graduated in 1923. He was an English major, and he immediately decided to write for the NYU daily newspaper which had a very good reputation. Around his sophomore or junior year, it turned out, of all things, that NYU was a football powerhouse, playing Army, Michigan, Notre Dame, Columbia, and other schools. The word spread that they're going to be ranked as one of the best college football teams. So my dad, who was in the sports department assigned to cover NYU football, was the innocent beneficiary of something called the "Stringer" system. A stringer is a writer for a periodical who gets assignments from other newspapers

around the country that didn't want to spend the money to send a reporter to come to New York City and cover NYU football; but they were more than happy to pay my father by the line or the word to write a story about those games.

The bottom line was my dad, at that age 20 or 21, was being paid a total of about \$100 a week from twenty or thirty newspapers combined during the football season 1921. And he translated this into believing the following, which affected him for the rest of his economic life – that being a sportswriter was going to be an economically rewarding career. And you know what I'm now going to tell you. He graduated NYU. At that time, there was a wide variety, twenty or so, newspapers in New York City. He was hired by *The Evening World*. Why do I know that? I know that because I have a memo he wrote telling the following. When he was 23 years old and had been at *The Evening World* for a year or two, he was called into the office of the sports editor in the summer of 1926, who said Len, here's our situation. The writer who for years has been covering the New York Yankees on the road has had an emergency operation. He can't go on the trip starting Sunday, so would you be able to go on the road with the 1926 New York Yankees? Can you arrange your schedule? The Yankees consisted of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Miller Huggins, the manager, and all of the most incredibly great players you could ever imagine. My dad not only said yes, but he realized at that time this was such an extraordinary event in his life, he wrote a two-page memo and left

it in his file. I found it a few years ago. It set out verbatim what the sports editor said to him, what he said back, and what he went and then did.

From 1926 to 1941, that's 15 years. Unlike the world of sports writing today where there's all these specialists, my dad learned how to cover virtually every sport extant with the exception of thoroughbred horse racing and boxing. That meant baseball, basketball, football, hockey, and tennis. He was one of the very early writers to pay attention to tennis. I'll walk you into my hallway and show you a picture of dad interviewing Billie Jean King when she was a young star. The great Don Budge wrote a beautiful tribute to dad after he died.

He left the *Evening World* after a few years and went to work for the *New York Post* where he stayed for his whole career. I think it was 40-some odd years. In 1941, in recognition to his journalistic skills, they promote him to the disaster of all disaster positions, the composing room editor, which meant he left the sports beat. He followed the teletype that was coming out minute after minute about the war and had to decide what should be the headline on the front page of the *New York Post* every day. He worked around the clock, 7 days a week, 18 hours a day, because if you ever did not have the right headline when you went to press, and *The Times*, *The News*, *The Mirror*, *The Evening*, *The World*, *The Herald*, *The Tribune*, etcetera, you were in trouble. This meant that from the time I was seven years old until eleven, I hardly ever saw my father. I became the "man" of the house, and my mother and I, as a result of that, had a



very special relationship. I did all the shopping, I did all the routine work that a father or husband would do. I didn't pay any attention to that. I loved doing it, and my mom and I bonded in a very unusual way.

In either 1944 or 1945, dad was rewarded by being promoted to be the Sports Editor of the *New York Post*, which, of course, he immediately takes. Now there's a side story. The owner of the *New York Post*, Dorothy Schiff, was a fascinating lady that everybody knew about in New York because she had, I believe, seven different husbands over the course of about twenty years, and what they apparently had in common was they were all ne'er-do-well guys. All were given major roles to play for the *New York Post*, which ended up having a detrimental effect on my father's career.

So it's 1944. I'm ten. I'm in the 5th grade or 6th grade. Until I left for Cornell in September 1951, those seven years, my life was sports for two reasons. One, upon assuming the role of sports editor, dad immediately started having a daily column called, "The Sports Parade" by Leonard Cohen, which appeared six days a week, not Sunday. As the sports editor and because he loved all these different sports, he also assigned himself to cover the World Series in baseball, the NFL and NBA playoffs, and the U.S. Open tennis tournament, to name a few major events. And for me, virtually every weekend throughout the year, I went with dad. We lived in Long Beach Long Island. He did not own an automobile, which made him quite famous. We lived one block from the

railroad station, which was the last station on the LIRR, 50 minutes to Brooklyn or 54 minutes to Penn Station, New York City. We then got on a subway to Ebbets Field Brooklyn or Polo Grounds or Yankee Stadium in New York City, which from 1945 to 1951, was the hub for every major sport, college and professional.

During this period, I not only went to Brooklyn Dodger games, but I went to Brooklyn Dodger training camps – 1946 at the Bear Mountain Inn near West Point. One incredibly important event took place. Jackie Robinson was placed on the Montreal roster after having been hired by Branch Rickey as the first “negro” in major league baseball. Rickey didn’t like the idea of trying out Jackie Robinson to go directly to the majors, so he sent him to the Montreal Royals. The Royals and the Dodgers trained together in 1946, and I was present the first day he ran out onto the field in a competitive game between two major league teams. I watched Dixie Walker, the legendary right fielder, try to start a boycott to keep Jackie Robinson from playing second base. He probably might have succeeded but for the fact that Pee Wee Reese, the Louisville Colonel captain, and the Dodger shortstop walked over, put his arm around Jackie Robinson, and that was the end of the potential boycott. That scene was repeated in 1947 when Jackie Robinson went out on the field in many major league ballparks, such as Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Philadelphia. Same thing would happen. Incidentally, Dixie Walker was traded by Branch Rickey that year to avoid that problem and to show the world he

was supporting Jackie. Branch Rickey was a genius. He knew Robinson was not the best “negro player” at the time, but he was, in Rickey’s mind, the right guy for the right time, the combination who Jackie Robinson was as an individual and his amazing wife who he met at UCLA. Jackie Robinson was an All-American halfback. Off the field, as a young Army lieutenant, he refused to sit in the back of a bus. He just started playing baseball with the Negro League after college. That was not his major sport. Amazing story.

I had the honor of reading my dad’s April 11, 1947 column the first day that Jackie Robinson played in a major league game. I’m pleased to say that dad was not only supportive of Jackie Robinson, but the end of his article, he said, “Jackie Robinson has been quoted as saying, ‘If the Army says I’m good enough to have a rifle and shoot somebody, the baseball owners should conclude likewise.’” So that was, as you might imagine, a major event in my life.

I became a diehard Dodger fan, and in 1947, I must have seen Jackie Robinson steal home plate 6 to 8 times. I watched him get on base and steal second. I watched everybody at Ebbets Field stand and start yelling because they were waiting for him to steal third. Once he did, the pitcher panicked. Robinson was a pigeon-toed speedster. That’s what he was famous for. He would walk off third base about 30 or 40 feet between third base and home, just staring at the pitcher who would try to figure out what the hell he was going to do, and then Jackie would steal home.

So as you can imagine, those were monumental memories. And then there was football. I attended NFL Giants games. Basketball was amazing in the winter because all of the great colleges, NYU, CCNY, St. John's, Fordham, LIU, St. Joseph's, all played in Madison Square Garden. Every major tournament ended up in Madison Square Garden. I was at many NIT and NCAA finals. I saw CCNY, the only team in history to win both of those tournaments in one season. I was present when the Wyoming coach in a game against NYU in Madison Square Garden referred to "those dirty Jews," and pointed at two players from NYU. My dad wrote a feature story about that incident. My eyes were opened to racial discrimination and anti-Semitic behavior.

Madison Square Garden was like a second home. The Knicks also played there, so I went to their games. I went to Track and Field meets there. I went to the U.S. Open. Tennis at Forest Hills. I went to polo. I saw Sugar Ray Robinson fight in an attempt to be the only fighter in the history of major boxing to win three titles at the same time. He was already lightweight and middleweight champ. He went for the light heavyweight championship at Yankee Stadium against the light heavyweight champion of the world named Joey Maxim. Robinson beat the heck out of Maxim for 13 rounds. It was 105 degrees at ringside, and Robinson couldn't answer the bell for the 14<sup>th</sup> round. It was a TKO. I saw Gionfriddo's phenomenal catch of Joe DiMaggio's "almost" home run over the left field fence. I saw Jackie Robinson in his famous battle

against Sal “The Barber” Maglie. Maglie threw at Jackie’s head three times in a row, knocking him down. Robinson got up each time, dusted himself off, and got back in the batter’s box. On the next pitch, Robinson responded by dragging a bunt down the first baseline. When Sal Maglie bent down to pick it up, Jackie hit him full speed and Sal Maglie flew up in the air and came down on his ass. But he just walked right back to the mound. He never complained, never yelled. Jackie won that battle.

Another unusual facet of my life in sports is where I sat during the games. I sat in the press box next to dad at all the baseball and football games, and at mid-court in basketball. I was at center ice at the hockey games. I was in the best seats at tennis. I was able to talk to all the writers. It was all just part of my life. They were just wonderful people. All my friends came with me because my father had tickets for them. The politicians in Long Beach went because of my father. They drove him on some occasions because he didn’t drive, and the joke in Long Beach, which you’ll appreciate, was until Billy Crystal came along 15 years younger than me, my father was probably the most celebrated person in Long Beach. In that tiny population, everybody read his articles, everybody knew who he was, and he treated everybody warmly. So it was a beautiful experience.

MR. POLLAK: At that time when you were going to basketball games, were the basketball teams integrated? What was the history there.

MR. COHEN: Great question. The answer is really fascinating. The vast majority of the public colleges, CCNY, NYU, LIU, were all white and mostly Jewish, with one exception, Sherman White at LIU. Sidney Tannenbaum, Danny Forman, Dolph Schayes. I knew them all because they used to come to Long Beach in the summer and play in the public courts across the street from my house before they went to swim in the ocean. They all knew my dad, so they'd all come to my house, and my mom would bring them lemonade and iced tea and a hose and after they played basketball, they'd drive to the ocean and swim.

The Catholic schools, St. Johns and Fordham, were primarily Irish Catholic and almost all white players. There are some sad stories about the "shaving" of points scandal and how college players started doing that and were subject to criminal investigations. One of them went to jail, Sherman White, the one Negro. But that's who was playing in those days.

MR. POLLAK: Fascinating. Tell me a little bit more about the Long Island town you grew up in and also what it was like to grow up Jewish in that community.

MR. COHEN: Well, in my mind, I had the greatest childhood. We were a very small, diversified town. If I had to guess, a third Jewish, a third Catholic (Irish and Italian), and a third Protestant, with a very small number of black residents. It appeared that everyone got along quite well. There was a Catholic school that some Catholics went to, but the high schools were totally integrated, as were the teams. The community was very sports-oriented.

I left this out. I went to public school where, like all people my age in my group, I did very well in school. I paid only a little attention to schoolwork, but nevertheless regularly received high grades. I didn't do anything that you would call intellectual. I left school at 3:00 in the afternoon, and I either played stickball, three-on-three basketball, or touch football. Because I was obsessed with trying to be an athlete, I started devoting myself to basketball. I had to overcome being 5' 7", 130 pounds. I made the freshman basketball team. I made the JV basketball team, and one of the great good fortunes of my life, in my senior year I made the varsity team. I was part of what were known as the "five little guys" who came in as a unit for the last four minutes of every game. We were a very good team, and a number of the first-string players got scholarships to play basketball in college. NYU, Tom De Luca. Harvard, Harry Sachs played center. Two others got college scholarships. They were all great guys. The coach, Bobby Gerstein, is a wonderful person. He's still alive. He's 90-plus years old. Remember Snuffy Stirnweiss, the New York Yankees superstar shortstop; our coach played second with him at college. I think it was North Carolina. Bobby Gerstein was one of the most knowledgeable people about the game of basketball, about how to teach people how to play, how to strategize, and how to beat the zone defense. It was an honor to be in his presence. At our high school reunions, he'd bring all the guys back to his house, pull out all the old yearbooks, and then joke about us individually. I don't mind telling this about myself. I

didn't score many points. I kept a yearbook. My son Bruce at some early age said Dad, why the heck are you keeping these yearbooks. You're only scoring three points a game. I said you know, in those days, 35 to 40 points could win a game and guards didn't shoot very much. I think in the last game in my senior year I get fouled five times while shooting, and I made most of my foul shots. I figured out I had scored eight points in two minutes, and at the "letter" ceremony, Bobby Gersten announced that if George had played that whole game, he would have scored 78 points. That was the standard joke about my basketball career.

MR. POLLAK: So it sounds like your dad stayed pretty busy throughout your childhood, even after that particularly rigorous time during the war. Was he ever home?

MR. COHEN: Yes. Well don't forget I left home in 1951. Dad was still Sports Editor around that time. I left out one thing I wanted to say about Phyllis and me. When Phyllis met me four years later in 1955, all my friends were telling her about these stories. This was Phyllis's assessment of me to anybody who we met here in Washington starting 1957 when they asked, how about George. She would get a smile on her face, and staccato, she would announce "sports, sports, sports, sports, sports." Just the way I'm saying it. Five times in a row. It's all she ever said to describe me. And everyone who knew about me encouraged it because they wanted to see if she would say something different. But no.



So you asked me the question about my dad. I went to Cornell in 1951. I knew girls existed, but I had no girlfriend in high school, and when I arrived at Cornell, there were five men to one woman. My daughter Julie's documentary about "RBG" quoted RBG's mother as saying, "Well Ruth, if you can't find a man there [Cornell], you are never going to find a man." And that was the social setting.

Back to dad. In the early 50s, after I went to college, he had the most unfortunate experience of his career. His daily column was a huge success. He focused on interesting oral histories of athletes. He never wrote about anybody's social life that wasn't favorable. As far as he was concerned, his focus was to report on what athletes were doing on the field. He didn't care what they drank the night before, who they were with the night before. He didn't think that was anybody's business. And he would be rolling over in his grave knowing what we now know is the standard operating procedure for any writer to describe a person's most private life. In this connection, we should understand that the social relationship between athletes, coaches and managers and writers was very close. For example, everyone knew that after every major sports event at Madison Square Garden, you went to one of two places, Leone's for Italian food or Toots Shor for drinks and entertainment. The managers went, the coaches went, and the writers went and everyone befriended each other.

MR. POLLAK: It's interesting. It's kind of like how political writing used to be in D.C. I grew up here, and that's obviously the sports of this town.

MR. COHEN: Yes. So early in the 1950s, Dorothy Schiff had a new husband. It doesn't matter who he was, but he comes on the scene, and he wants to expand the circulation of the *New York Post*. At that time, the *New York Post* sports section was very extensive, maybe twenty pages, devoted both to post-game coverage and feature stories, and sports were very popular, and so was the *Post's* sports section. The day newspapers, the *New York Mirror* and the *New York News*, also had major sports coverage. *The New York Times* had sports coverage with great writers, but much fewer pages. The *New York Herald Tribune* was competing with *The New York Times*.

In any event, Dorothy Schiff's new husband tells my dad we need to do something to increase circulation, so we have decided that you are going to put on the back page of every daily newspaper the morning line on betting odds for major league baseball games. My dad is reputed to have replied what does that have to do with sports? He's told a lot of readers bet on games, and we want to make it easier for them to do so. To make a long story long, my dad said in essence "not on my watch." He was not fired, but he was demoted and sent to Siberia, i.e., covering harness racing!

My dad was the classic Depression guy. He thought anybody that made \$50,000 a year was doing real well. He was very concerned about security for my mom and his family, so he accepted the demotion. But

here's the beautiful part of the story. He was only in Siberia part of the year. He also ended up covering the Dodgers, the Giants, the Yankees, football, hockey, tennis as a "fill-in" when the regular assigned writers were on vacation or sick. And that I think was the saving grace for him. He never said to me the demotion was the end of the earth. I accepted what happened to him, and in retrospect, I think it played a role in encouraging me to become a labor lawyer. So let me stop there. Do you have anything you want to ask me about that?

MR. POLLAK: It sounds like that was influential on you going forward.

MR. COHEN: I think it was.

MR. POLLAK: Do you remember experiencing anger or confusion about what happened?

MR. COHEN: I didn't have confusion. I had admiration. It turned out it was not a catastrophe. And to this day, if you go to the harness racing track in Yonkers, New York, I think the track is still there, and if you go up to the top floor where the press and the announcer are located, you'll see "Len Cohen's Corner," a suite where all the writers and guests congregate to socialize and dine. That was really how my father did everything in life. He always adapted. He never really had the fighting back instinct, which I would have preferred. But that was his life and his judgment, and it did influence me a little bit.

MR. POLLAK: Do you remember anything about the unions at the newspaper?

MR. COHEN: Oh I know a lot about that.

MR. POLLAK: That you experienced growing up, like strikes?

MR. COHEN:

No. There were no strikes. You realize these were the war years, and a strike in the newspaper industry would have been a “no-no.” But when dad was getting close to retirement in 1974, the question of his pension and health care arose. I joined Elliott and Mike in 1966, so I already had had eight years of experience as a labor lawyer when this all came to pass. I learned two things which were fascinating. The workers in every major newspaper in New York City, besides The Newspaper Guild, TNG, which was basically just the journalists, were represented by between seven and ten unions. They were all crafts. Every time management wanted to implement some kind of an initiative, to make an operation “more efficient,” one or more union rules came into play, jurisdictional disputes galore. What came to my mind is my dad told me, and the managing editor of the *New York Post* I think also told me this at an awards ceremony, that dad’s claim to fame was when he was the composing room editor during World War II, if there was two minutes to go to deadline for the front page, the particular craft union workers most responsible for skillfully handling the little pieces of lead allowed my father, even though he was management, to do their work. This was unheard of, and it was only because of their relationship with and respect for my dad.

In 1974, I also learned how tough the Dorothy Schiff family had been on the unions with respect to basic economic benefits. After 45 years at the *Post*, dad didn’t get a monthly pension benefit. He received a lump sum payment based upon the number of years of service multiplied by a

certain amount of money. That's what you received on your retirement, with two choices. You can get a lump sum payout, in which case your surviving spouse will get very little, or you can receive an actuarially reduced amount in which case your spouse will continue to receive a pension after you die. You can imagine which one my dad picked for mom. That experience was just another reason why I was so committed to represent working men and women. I was already a committed guy who loved "reverse snobbery." To this day, I love aiding the underdog. I think it's just wonderful what you're doing and my colleagues are doing.

MR. POLLAK: Are there other events you remember from your childhood that you see as formative to your what you call reverse snobbery, but I would call just getting with the unions and fighting the good fight?

MR. COHEN: No.

MR. POLLAK: Are there any other jobs from your teen years?

MR. COHEN: Yes. In Long Beach. Well, I actually had the job that led to my meeting my wonderful wife. I went to Cornell for three years. I was undergraduate in liberal arts. I was what was called a government major. Yale might have called it Poli-Sci. I had three amazingly productive years at Cornell. I wrote for the *Cornell Daily Sun* sports section. I was in a fraternity that was the only non-sectarian fraternity of the 57 fraternities on campus. I didn't know that at the time, but I learned it afterward. I had the great pleasure of meeting fellow students who were Chinese, Japanese, French Canadian, etcetera. But there were virtually no undergraduate

black students at Cornell, which was a bit misleading because there was a significant number of blacks on the campus, all in graduate schools – Africans, Asians, Caribbeans, but no undergraduates. The few blacks were probably on athletic scholarships. I later learned that there was an implied quota for Jews as well, which was never discussed.

I loved my undergraduate three years, but still had not met Phyllis. I finished three years and was told that Cornell Law School would allow you to “double register” in law school, waive your senior year of college, and go directly to law school. After one year in law school, you would receive a BA, provided your first year law school grades were satisfactory. About 20 in my law school class of 125 or so were double registrants. I was friendly with a number of them. Most were government or economics majors, and we knew each other from the Liberal Arts college. I didn’t enroll in law school because my mind was made up that I wanted to be a lawyer. My decision was a more practical one. Why not see what it’s like? I have nothing to lose if I don’t like it, and I will save one year tuition if I remain for two more years. I walked into law school. I’m 21 years old. I immediately realized many of my classmates were 25-30 years old, some married, some parents, all very serious about their futures. A couple of them had been football stars or were war veterans. I really felt I had made a dramatic mistake. What was my mistake? I gave up being the Sports Editor of the *Cornell Daily Sun* and maybe the chancellor of my fraternity. I was giving all this up to do something I didn’t know

whether I wanted. So I was not a happy camper. And then I found the first year of law school to be very boring and very intimidating. But there was one professor, Rudy Schlesinger, who made a distinct impression on me because of his brilliant spellbinding lectures. I forgot to mention my undergraduate professors. The quality of the faculty that I took classes from was beyond superb. I had Vladimir Nabokov for Russian literature. I had Robert Cushman for Constitutional Law. I had Clinton Rossiter for State and Local Governments and Alfred Kahn, chair of the CAB in later life, taught Federal Regulation of Business. I had probably the best course I took in my first three years, not given by a Cornell faculty member, but by a distinguished professor who was on sabbatical from Columbia named Fritz Stern. At Columbia, he taught a course covering the History of Western Civilization. Back to Fred Kahn. You went into one of his classes, he's wearing a World War II Eisenhower jacket. It's now 1953. Fred Kahn would shop at these little, what do you do when your wife sells clothes out on her lawn and brings out all the old clothes. What do we call those?

MR. POLLAK: A tag sale?

MR. COHEN: Yes. And that's where he bought his clothes. That was only the beginning. In an early lecture, he'd inquire how many of you own cars. There's 30 or 35 in the lecture, and 5 to 10 raised their hands. I did not own a car. Here's what I want you to do as your economics professor. There's a place, Horseheads, New York, about 37 1/2 miles from here.

You'll get there in 39 minutes, and it's 37 miles back, so it's only 75-miles roundtrip. They're selling gas at three to five cents a gallon less than Esso, Sonoco, et cetera, and you owe it to keep this independent gas station in business. And we all sat there mesmerized.

MR. POLLAK: Before we leave your childhood behind, is there anything you want to say about your mom and influences that she had on your life?

MR. COHEN: My mom had phenomenal practical skills and knowledge, and then this whole relationship I had with her when I became the "man of the house" was in retrospect a fabulous thing to have happened. She was totally supportive, totally encouraging, never had a negative thing to say, was beloved by all her friends. When they wanted advice, Gladys was the person to talk to. She and my father had a beautiful, loving relationship. She supported him in everything he did, and he was 110% her husband. One great story about them. Dad comes home one night, and he's sleeping. In the middle of the night, my mother gets up and starts shouting and screaming what happened to you, what happened to you? My dad was bald at the time. That night, he was covering a boxing fight at ringside and a fighter spit blood on his bald head, and he's got red blood caked all over his head. My mother thinks he's been injured. My father wakes up startled. Everyone in the family gets up. Everyone starts laughing like hell. You can't ask for more than that. That was perfect.



MR. POLLAK: It sounds like your parents didn't push you in any particular direction, so what on earth, other than the other guys were doing it at Cornell, led you to want to go to law school?

MR. COHEN: I had in the back of my mind two conflicting thoughts. I've got sports, but I didn't want to be my father's son. He was always putting my name out there, right? George is doing this, George is doing that. And everybody in the sports world that knew him knew me, and I was putting two and two together and saying I don't know how much talent I really have as a writer. Second, if I'm getting a job offer to be a sportswriter because I'm Len Cohen's son, I guess I had enough independence in me at age 21 or 22 to say you know what, I think I ought to go out and try to make it on my own. And I was always that kind of a person. I never said to myself, I'm in my third year of college and I really want to be a lawyer. I didn't say that. Everyone said you know that going to law school is great. Once you have a law degree, you can do anything. That was definitely thought about in those days. You want to go into business? Great. There's nothing wrong with having a law degree. If you're asking me if I had graduated in 1955 instead of going to law school, would I have applied to Harvard Law School or Columbia Law School? I don't really know the answer to that. I think I probably would have, but this is so easy for me to say now.

MR. POLLAK: One other question about the pre-law school period. Did you travel with your family? It sounds very New York-centric.

MR. COHEN: Well think about my father.

MR. POLLAK: Right. He was working right 24/7.

MR. COHEN: I went to Dodger spring training in Vero Beach. I went to the Borscht Belt with him to see the college basketball players play in the summer. You've got to understand what 1947 to 1951 were like. People were finally coming out of the WWII doldrums, getting a car, spending money. Unless you were really well fixed for money, you weren't thinking about traveling, and then there wasn't that much available. Who was doing those trips? I don't know anybody that was flying around the world in 1948 or 1949, certainly not my family. I don't know what your dad would say about 1947 to 1951 in his life

MR. POLLAK: Probably the same. If the Yankees were in the World Series, would you go to Chicago?

MR. COHEN: No. I didn't do that. I didn't have to. Nobody thought of going out of New York. Seriously, no. Because sports meant New York. I didn't think about that. Years later I took a couple of friends to Philadelphia for the World Series.

MR. POLLAK: Never a dull moment.

MR. COHEN: Never a dull moment, and all just enjoyment with the people. I was 15, and writers were stopping and talking to me in the press box. It was all quite extraordinary.

MR. POLLAK: That's fantastic. So we heard a little bit about college. Is there anything else you want to cover?

MR. COHEN: Yes. Well I have to cover meeting Phyllis.

MR. POLLAK: Nothing more important than that.

MR. COHEN: No, and it also answers another one of your questions and it also is a reflection again on my father and sports. I told you before that I completed my first year law school, and I received my BA in 1955, and I came home to Long Beach that summer and lived with my parents. I knew I was going back to Cornell for the Fall semester, my second year. I met a lot of other people in law school, including Guy Bedrossian. He was the fullback and captain of the football team. I had befriended Guy in the context of being a sportswriter, and somewhere along the line, in that spring before I graduated, he told me he was graduating and leaving and had been renting a great house at the bottom of campus, right where the City of Ithaca begins. He showed it to me. I had been living in the dorm and then in the fraternity house. I walk in, and it's a house with a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, two bedrooms, a couple of bathrooms. I'm saying this is great, what's the deal. He said it's owned by a man in Ithaca. He had four roommates. Get yourself four roommates, go in and sign the lease, I'll recommend you. I said Guy, this is fantastic. I didn't realize at the time I had no transportation, but forget it. So I found two law students who had been NYU undergrads, one of whom had a car, and two friends of mine from Cornell who were in other fraternities that I knew, Arthur Kananack and Frank Tretter. They were all delighted to be joining me in the house. Everybody on campus loved Arthur. He was

going to be my roommate. He was a Brooklynite. So let's go back to that summer again. My dad said to me I think I have a possible job for you this summer. He said call Phil Kohut. He'll talk to you. This is a small town, and he's the head of the Democratic party machine. Of course he's befriended Leonard Cohen because Leonard took him to some sports events. I called Mr. Kohut, and he said everything's going to be taken care of. Report to the police station Monday morning at 8:00. Ray Panza is going to take care of you. Who's Ray Panza? He's the lieutenant in charge of the motorcycle division and one of the toughest policemen you've ever met in your life. I show up. It's a "shape up," and as I walk in, Ray Panza says, Cohen, come over here. You're going to be in a group of 12 young college guys. You're all going to be summer traffic cops. You're going to have the greatest experience of your life. But Cohen, I heard about you. I heard a little about you.

I didn't tell you that in elementary school, one of my reviews said I was "obstreperous." And I didn't know what obstreperous meant, but my father did, and that became a signal in my family. Anybody who asked about George, he's a bit obstreperous. So he had been told I was obstreperous, without using the word. He then said go into the other room, and you will be outfitted with your uniform and your equipment, badge, billy club, hand cuffs, but no revolver. He also said I just want you to know I'm assigning you to Park Avenue and Long Beach Boulevard, the single most busy intersection in Long Beach. Thousands of cars pass

through that intersection on the way to the ocean and the beaches and boardwalk. I didn't tell him because I couldn't tell him that I did not have a driver's license. So I'm stationed at this very busy intersection with a clicker in my hand. Any time I want to take the light off of the 45-second cycle, I just click. I was in charge, and I could control the traffic pattern any way I wanted. This is all a dream come true.

MR. POLLAK: All without training?

MR. COHEN: All without training. The training was as follows. For the first couple of weeks, every four to six to eight hours, Ray Panza would come by in the motorcycle to watch me in action. He never threw me off the job. Okay, that's my job, and I'm loving it. Now I learn from some of the more experienced police officers there was a fringe benefit. If you happen to notice a convertible with the top down and a beautiful blonde-haired, blue-eyed lady driving, you have that whistle. I forgot to mention the whistle. You just blow her over and ask for license and registration. You can do that any time you want, so you can have any conversation with any lovely lady that you choose to have. The other major fringe benefit was that every store owner in the immediate vicinity, every bakery, every delicatessen, as soon as you walked in, they said we're so glad to see you, what can we get you? A pastrami sandwich, a beer, a coke? I didn't drink beer while on duty. You're just treated like it's a little town. Everybody knows everybody. Everybody knew I was Leonard Cohen's son, and

everybody knew I was in college. So I'm just having a great experience. On a scale of 1 to 10, this is 25.

Okay. Fast forward to August. I get a phone call from Arthur. He said later today, I am going to be driving out to Atlantic Beach, which is the adjoining beach for the hotshots where his father and mother had a cabana, with a really great friend of mine, Phyllis Goody. He said I told her even though she's really popular and she has a boyfriend, I think she would really like you, and I think you'd really like her. He then said, I think I'm going to come by your traffic intersection about 2:00. How should we arrange for you to meet Phyllis and me? I said Arthur, when I see you coming, I'll blow my whistle. I'll change the light. You'll pull the car over, and I'll come over and talk to both of you. And that's exactly what happened. How many people met for the first time the woman that they were going to be married with and live with for 61 years the way we did. I don't think very many! In any event, when they pulled over to the side of the road, I had a 10- or 15-minute conversation with Arthur and Phyllis. She had a great sense of humor, and she seemed, of course, as all Cornell coeds, smart. And yes, I noticed she was very attractive. She did appear to be wondering why in the world I was doing this job. I'm not the most articulate guy with young ladies, so I said something like school starts in September. I hope we see each other on the "quad." She, of course, replied yes, and that was the end of Phyllis and me for that period of time.

So we go back to school and it's September, and Arthur repeats again how popular Phyllis is and how many boyfriends she has.

MR. POLLAK: Arthur was the matchmaker.

MR. COHEN: Oh absolutely. Without a doubt.

MR. POLLAK: That's amazing

MR. COHEN: He died as a very young man of a heart attack. That was one of the saddest days of my life because he was such a great human being. After graduation from law school, he went to work for Viacom and became one of their premier executives, acquiring the rights to foreign films and bringing them to the United States. He did that for about 20 years. He married an English young woman, Pamela, who we loved, as well as his children. His dad had died of a heart attack as a young man. Arthur had a couple of heart attacks in his 50s and died, probably about 60.

In any event, the next time I saw Phyllis was in September or October during the Jewish holidays at the synagogue on the Cornell campus. We had a lovely, short conversation. She said great to see you, and I said great to see you, and then I walked back to my apartment. That night, or a week later, I said to Arthur, you know what, I'll give Phyllis a call. In those days, the major social events were based on Saturday's football games, followed by the fraternity parties at night. I asked if she was available for the Yale game. Phyllis of course said no I'm booked for the Yale game. I said how about the Dartmouth game. That was three weeks later. She said oh I'm really sorry, and she was lovely about it. I

said let me ask you something. Do you go out on Sundays, and she said yes, I go out on Sundays. I said good, would you like to go out for pizza and a movie next Sunday. She said that would be fine. So my relationship with Phyllis in that entire year was basically limited to being with her once every three or four weeks on a Sunday night. I was enjoying being with her, and she appeared to like me, and that was it.

In the Spring of 1956, we chatted about my summer plans. Again, this is a little extra special. I was going to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the home of the fighting 82nd Airborne, because I had signed up for advanced ROTC after my two mandatory years. I had concluded that I was going to be drafted at the end of law school, and I would prefer to be a Second Lieutenant rather than a Private. At the beginning of our second year of law school, a number of my fellow “double registrants” walked over to the Army ROTC leadership en masse and said we had finished two years of mandatory ROTC. We would like to get commissions at the end of law school. We have two years left. Would you accept us and give us credit for our Air Force ROTC training? We were accepted and then had an obligation to attend a mandatory six weeks of summer training. Before we left, Phyllis said to me, knowing I’m going to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and she’s never known anybody who’s been there, why don’t we write letters to each other? I’d like to know what’s going to happen to you during those six weeks. And I, of course, in my brilliant way said okay. I’m 22 years old, and I’ve been in two years of law school, so I’m like a



senior guy, and I figure out pretty quickly that the summer training is psychological warfare. This is red clay country. This is the 82nd Airborne. This is 112 to 115 degrees during the day. We're up at 5:00 in the morning preparing 30-pound backpacks for marching. We're exercising. We're being disciplined, we're being yelled at. I'm finding this to be most fascinating. Of course I know what's happening. I know every single group of cadets going through this is being treated the exact same way – a form of brainwashing! Anyway, you're exhausted. So at 10:00 at night when you're sitting there finally left alone and someone yells your name saying mail call and you get a letter, you're feeling good about that, right? Phyllis's first letter was nice, and then I wrote back. And the second letter was a little nicer, and I wrote back. And the third letter was really nice, and it gave the appearance that Phyllis liked me, and I wanted to give an appearance back that I liked her because what else do you do? And then came the transformative letter the week before or so before the end of summer camp. There were two "x's" at the end of her letter, and I said to myself, wow. Two x's. What does that mean. I had no one to ask, but I figured out it meant something more than not any x's, so, of course, I put two and two together and said I better put some x's at the end of my letter too.

Back I go to home. I'm in the greatest shape I've ever been in my life. I'm the strongest I've ever been. I've tolerated six weeks of the most incredible experience of my life, and it looks like I have a girlfriend. I

went back to my third year of law school, and we spent a lot of wonderful time together. I had a two-year commitment to serve in the Army. I don't know where I would be stationed. I dreamt maybe I'm going to go to Paris or someplace. So when Phyllis started acting like we should talk about a serious commitment, which I believe I was totally intimidated by, I had a very easy response. I have no money. I thought a man is supposed to have some money to support a woman, and I don't even know what I'm going to do for the next two years, so don't start relying on me for a while. For her part, she wanted her own career. In her senior year, she took a Federal Management Examination and scored extremely well. It was a government-wide exam, and her score was distributed to every federal executive agency that wanted to establish or maintain a management intern program to develop young civil servants who would eventually be in leadership positions. Phyllis was interviewed by a number of agencies and picked the Labor Department because she was told the Labor Department was the most woman-friendly cabinet-level agency you could find. There's former Secretary of Labor Esther Peterson. So she heads to Washington in June 1957 to start working as a management intern. I went home to Long Beach and worked for a law firm for the three months waiting my assignment. I had to wait until November before attending officers training in Fort Lee, Petersburg, Virginia, for four months. During that period, we regularly visited each other, mostly in Washington. Phyllis had come here without knowing one person, but she made friends

quickly. And at work, she was a star. The Labor Department provided a rotating three months in each of three departments, and by the time she was done with the third, the chief economist picked her out, sent her over to the lovely red brick town houses on Jefferson Place across from the White House where he was supervising a comprehensive study comparing urban states' labor laws with those in the South. Phyllis played a major role on that project.

We were married in December 1958, and decided to begin our married life in D.C. Shortly thereafter, she received another promotion. The LMRDA was passed in 1959. Mr. Howard Jenkins, a prominent African American who later became a member of the NLRB, was given the first job to administer the LMRDA. Phyllis was an assistant, and during many dinner times in our early married life, she'd tell me all about the labor issues that she was looking at, even though she's not a lawyer. She was studying the statute and the regulations. My reaction was this really sounds interesting. I decided to go to Georgetown Law School at night and focus on labor law, and that's what I did.

MR. POLLAK: Was 1958 the passage of Taft-Hartley?

MR. COHEN: No. Taft-Hartley was 1947. LMRDA was 1959. At Georgetown Law School, I took about ten labor law courses, all terrific. Arbitration, Labor Law, Labor Management Relations, Collective Bargaining, Mediation. Here's a great irony. The adjunct professor teaching Mediation at Georgetown in the LLM programs was Cyrus Ching, the first Director of

the FMCS, nominated by Harry Truman 1947. With a pipe in his mouth, he had the loudest, most powerful voice you could imagine telling these incredible stories about mediation. Fast forward to 2009. I have been confirmed as the Director of FMCS almost 50 years later. The first room adjacent to my office is the Cyrus Ching Conference Hall. I walked in and I saw his photo on the wall and said oh my God. He had been my mediation professor at Georgetown Law School.

MR. POLLAK: George, was there anything that he taught you about mediation that influenced you later in your career?

MR. COHEN: You know, Roger, an ability to impress upon the importance of getting to an agreement, i.e., to use techniques which included a sense of humor and basic humility and humanity.

MR. POLLAK: Well that might be a good place to wrap up today.

MR. COHEN: I think so. I'm exhausted.

MR. POLLAK: It's just absolutely fascinating that you met Phyllis, and it was her experience at the Labor Department, which was where she went because it being favorable for women, and then her telling you stories, which led you to go into the LLM program.

MR. COHEN: Yes. Without a doubt, she played a major role. You know what you are in law school. You went through it. Do you want to be a tax lawyer, do you want to be an estate lawyer, do you want to be a corporate lawyer, do you want to be a trial lawyer? I had no interest in any of those areas. Moot Court at Cornell Law School made a major impression on me. I felt

of all the things I might be okay at, I felt I could hold my own at appellate advocacy. We had a great moot court team, and we had two or three moot court events with other law schools and judges critiquing you. I started looking in Washington for a job and found out that Mike Gottesman did a lot of appellate court work. I was excited.

MR. POLLAK: So to set the record straight, before the Phyllis job at the Department of Labor, you hadn't been fascinated by labor courses in the law school?

MR. COHEN: There were no labor law courses. There was a great professor in the Industrial Labor Relations (ILR) School teaching Constitutional Law, but because I waived my fourth year of college, I never got to take his course. At that time, there was no labor courses at Cornell. Cornell University, the home of the ILR school, no labor law professor teaching a course. It was astounding.

MR. POLLAK: Hard to believe. This has been really fun. Thank you.

MR. COHEN: This was exhausting.