



THE RUTH ANN OVERBECK
CAPITOL HILL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview with Sig Cohen

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TAPE 1/SIDE 1

DEUTSCH: This is Stephanie Deutsch. It is January 26, 2010, and I'm sitting with Sig Cohen at 500 East Capitol Street NE. Sig, why don't you start by telling me where you grew up?

COHEN: I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, up to the age of 18 when I went away to university. I attended Walnut Hills High School, which is a public, college-prep high school.

DEUTSCH: I'm actually very familiar with Walnut Hills, because my niece graduated from there. I've been to graduation at Walnut Hills.

COHEN: Well, people who went there feel very proud of the fact that they went to ... believe it or not, I went to my 50th high school reunion a couple of years ago. It was great. I never worked harder academically. But it was great.

DEUTSCH: Did you live right in town?

COHEN: In town, yeah. I lived in a suburb there called North Avondale, for what that's worth. I had a very nice middle-class childhood.

DEUTSCH: What did your dad do? Your parents?

COHEN: My father was in the shoe business. It was a family shoe business. They had shoe stores around the Midwest and South.

DEUTSCH: What were they called?

COHEN: First it was called the Dan Cohen Shoe Company, and then it was changed to call it Collier Shoes. Sadly the company went belly-up in the, I think, mid 60s. Then the company moved to Philadelphia. My mother worked as a special events person at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, where they train Reform rabbis, young men who want to become Reform rabbis. It was an average childhood.

DEUTSCH: Did you work in the shoe store?

COHEN: One or two summers I might have worked there. In the warehouse. Nothing extraordinary.

DEUTSCH: Sisters and brothers?

COHEN: I have a sister younger than I. She lives in Takoma Park here in Maryland and worked for the Superior Court. She is the one who got me into mediation. She and her husband live in Takoma Park.

He's a retired fire chief, and she's very active voluntarily in her community and as an Emergency Medical Technician with the Silver Spring Volunteer Fire Department.

DEUTSCH: Did you do any extra curriculars in high school? Were you involved in, or were you just working hard?

COHEN: I was short and dirty.

DEUTSCH: (Laughs) We don't believe that.

COHEN: I joined one organization, which in the 50s was a little bit radical. It was called Fellowship House, and it tried to improve relations between Christians, Jews, and African-Americans. That was sort of interesting, getting that kind of exposure, and, I don't know what else I did.

DEUTSCH: Was there a good racial mix at the high school?

COHEN: Yes, as a matter of fact. It wasn't optimum, but it was, for Cincinnati at that time, in the early 50s, it was thoroughly integrated and no visible discrimination. A black student might have a different opinion, but I felt pretty good about going to a school which was open. All the schools in Cincinnati were integrated. There wasn't a bar against one ethnic group or another.

DEUTSCH: OK. So college?

COHEN: Then I went away to the University of Pennsylvania for four years. I entered something called the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce. After two years I found that wasn't my thing, so I retreated or I moved to liberal arts. I still graduated from Wharton, but I took as many liberal arts courses as I could. The only extracurricular activity I recall was the fencing team. I fenced there. Then joined the Army. I was in ROTC, and spent two years in the Army. Then I went to graduate school.

DEUTSCH: Two years in the Army. What years was this?

COHEN: '59 to '61.

DEUTSCH: So pre-Vietnam.

COHEN: Pre-Vietnam. I was in the Transportation Corps, and my overseas tour of duty was in Thule, Greenland, for one summer when the port was unfrozen, and my ship platoon unloaded ships, restocking the airbase in Thule, Greenland. After the army I had a feeling I'd like to go in the Foreign Service, so I went and got my M.A. at the University of Chicago, took the Foreign Service exam, miraculously passed it, and ...

DEUTSCH: You got an M.A. in ...?

COHEN: Sort of International Relations kind of thing. Got married while I was in graduate school, and I was sworn in by no less than Edward R. Murrow in the summer of 1993. '63, I'm sorry, '63.

DEUTSCH: So you were at USIA?

COHEN: USIA.

DEUTSCH: Was Murrow head of USIA then?

COHEN: Yeah. John Kennedy appointed him as director of USIA. Brilliant appointment. Absolutely brilliant appointment. What a guy, what a man he was. I went through the training there. We were assigned, much to our disbelief, to Dacca, East Pakistan, before it became Bangladesh.

DEUTSCH: Why did you disbelieve?

COHEN: Because I wrote my master's degree on Latin American subjects; I really wanted to go to Latin America and I had studied Spanish, and I begged them to send me to Latin America. They asked the trick question. They said, "If we can't teach you Spanish or Portuguese, what hard language would you want to come up with?" And I was thinking of a hard language, and I asked for a bunch of languages. "No, we don't teach this" "No, we don't teach this" so quite stupidly, it turns out, I said "Oh, God, teach me Bengali," thinking they would never do it, and indeed they did. So I was assigned to Dacca, with a six-months pregnant wife, and we traveled there in December of '63. I spent the first six months learning Bengali. [Laughs] Then served out two years there. Our son was born there in May of '64.

DEUTSCH: What's his name?

COHEN: Eric.

DEUTSCH: I-C, Eric?

COHEN: I-C. Then we were moved to Calcutta for three and a half years, which was like going from Albany to Manhattan. We had three and a half years in Calcutta, where our daughter Risa Cohen, was born. It was fabulous. It was wild, fabulous in the 60s, in Calcutta.

DEUTSCH: Can you say a little bit more about ...

COHEN: My job? My job was University Program Officer, so I took these "dog and pony shows" about American life and politics to Indian colleges and universities throughout eastern India.

DEUTSCH: So you got to travel a lot.

COHEN: I got to travel a lot, and learn a lot about life and society in that part of the world. I gained as much as I gave. It was a very beneficial experience. We came back to Washington for three years, until '72, and from '72 till '76 we served in Germany.

DEUTSCH: When you came back to Washington, did you live on the Hill?

COHEN: No. We lived in Wheaton.

DEUTSCH: Because you hadn't lived really in Washington before.

COHEN: [When] we came here before we lived out near Seven Corners. And then when we came back from India we lived in Wheaton and then four years in Germany; Bonn first and then Hamburg.

DEUTSCH: They still weren't going to let you speak Spanish.

COHEN: Never. Never, never, never. And then we came back for five years.

DEUTSCH: Now we're at '80?

COHEN: Now we're into '76 to '81. [Statements deleted at request of interviewee.] So in '81 I got assigned to the "Jewel in the Crown," namely London, where I was Press Attaché for the next five—four and a half—years, which was the dream assignment.

DEUTSCH: And that was in the early 80s?

COHEN: Yeah, '81 to '86.

DEUTSCH: Dream assignment.

COHEN: Dream assignment. Unbelievable assignment.

DEUTSCH: Because of the work? And because of living in London?

COHEN: Everything. Imagine four and a half years in London.

DEUTSCH: Sounds good. [They laugh]

COHEN: Susan studied three years full time the Alexander Technique. We came back from London in '86 and Ken Adelman, after he got back from London, asked me to become Director of Public Affairs at the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. I did that [here] for three years, and my last three years in

the USIA and in the government were spent, as, I don't know what—program director—not director, but program director of the television service of USIA.

DEUTSCH: Sort of like the Voice of America?

COHEN: It was a separate ... In time it went under VOA, but while I was there, most of the time I was there it was an independent entity of USIA. Then I retired in October of '92, and before I retired I went to night school. I went to George Washington night school and learned fundraising, because I knew when I got out I wanted to go into fundraising as a field. So the day after I retired I went to work for a professional fundraising counsel based in Bethesda.

DEUTSCH: Why did you want to ... what was it about fundraising?

COHEN: I just wanted to learn it. I was intrigued by it. The thing I knew was I wanted to work locally. All my professional life I had been someplace for a couple of years, left, been someplace, left. There was no real opportunity to develop long-term relationships or feel a sense of accomplishment on a long-term basis, and so I knew when I came back I wanted to go into local stuff, and not being a social worker, or having a professional background in any of these areas, it came to me that I should try to learn fundraising. I worked for this marvelous woman who's a fundraising counsel for a year or so, and then I became the first fundraising person at a day homeless person program in Tenleytown called Friendship Place. I worked there for two or three years.

DEUTSCH: It was called Friendship Place?

COHEN: The long title is Community Council for the Homeless at Friendship Place. It's an amazingly successful day program for homeless people in Ward Three. It was neat, getting in close to the ground floor. It was a fascinating organization. I learned a lot about homelessness. When I finally decided I really ... there wasn't much more I could do, and I was getting a little—I hate to use the word—"burned out". We can use another word than "burned out". I came back to the Hill, and I had a mix of stuff I was doing.

DEUTSCH: By then you were living on the Hill.

COHEN: Yeah. When we came back from London in '86, I knew one thing: I would never live in the suburbs again. The question is, "Where would we live?" and we knew no more about Capitol Hill than we knew about Chevy Chase, but thankfully we moved to Capitol Hill. It was probably one of the best decisions we ever made. I went to work part-time as fundraiser for Lynn Kneedler at the Group Ministry. A sort of part-time job. Just learning about the homeless conditions on the Hill which were very, very different from the homeless conditions in Ward Three, because here, mostly families, and up there,

they're single people, individuals without kids. So there's a different homeless demographic if you will. Up there and here. So I learned a lot about that. Then I was doing mediation as well; I started in Small Claims, then went into Family Mediation. Back up: when I was in London, I did Suicide Hotline as a volunteer. So I worked at an organization called the Samaritans.

DEUTSCH: What prompted you to do that?

COHEN: I felt led to do it. I don't understand, I just did it. It was sort of interesting. I wanted to do it. It was something I could do without taking it home. When I do any of this kind of work, fortunately it doesn't overwhelm me.

DEUTSCH: Crowd out ...

COHEN: It doesn't crowd me out. I found this organization, the branch of this organization here in Washington in Tenleytown, called the Samaritan Washington so I did homeless—I did suicide hotline there. I was a volunteer there for a year or two. Then I was asked to be chairman of the board, which was a phenomenal mistake on my part because ...

DEUTSCH: Chairman of the Board of the Samaritans?

COHEN: Of the Samaritans. Which was an organization that had no financial, long-term financial viability, but little did I know that. Painfully, I closed down the organization. That did have some impact on me. I closed it down because the money wasn't there. They couldn't pay the rent. I was working with Lynn at the Group Ministry. They started something 10, 11 years ago. The Child and Family Services Agency of the District of Columbia was in court receivership for a long time. It just had a terrible time.

The Receiver brought in a guy named Jerry Miller who came here with absolutely radical ideas. One of his radical ideas was to situate community-based organizations aimed at reducing, if not eliminating, incidents of child abuse and child neglect, but situate these organizations throughout the city, instead of having the social workers and the Child and Family Services Agency headquartered in one place, put these units throughout the city. So in time, there were eight of these established, and it was left to people in the community to actually organize and constitute them. So by virtue of my working at the Group Ministry, I got involved as one of a number of founders of the South Washington/West-of-the River Family Strengthening Collaborative. (What a long name it is.) We created this organization which was initially based in the Old Naval Hospital under the aegis of the then Friendship House. But a number of organizations like the Group Ministry and Friendship House and CAG [ed: Community Action Group] and others, very much Sasha Bruce, collaborated in creating a community-based organization aimed at

reducing and eliminating not just the incidence of child neglect and abuse, but the preconditions for child abuse and child neglect.

DEUTSCH: Pretty ambitious!

COHEN: Very ambitious. In time, seven of these, to my knowledge—maybe only six now—are left, and they are thriving. They're successful, they have proven him right. The South Washington Collaborative had initially a nice guy who left, I forget why he left. I became the acting director of that organization for about nine months. This is what was so interesting for me. I was getting involved in the community, both through the Group Ministry and by virtue of my being involved with the Collaborative and meeting people, very ... become very close to people living in public housing. I remember, I think I might have met you the first time, I certainly met Nicky [Cymrot] the first time, when the Community Foundation made a grant to purchase basketball uniforms for a team at Arthur Capper [public housing]. My first contact with you all; we put in for a mini-grant, God, I don't know, 10-11 years ago. It was that kind of thing. How to provide an array of services and supports to folks in a variety of ways. I was doing that. At the same time, I was Court-Appointed Special Advocate, a CASA, which Judy Canning did. When you interviewed her, whomever interviewed Judy Canning ...

DEUTSCH: I did.

COHEN: She told you about her experience as a CASA, Court-Appointed Special Advocate.

DEUTSCH: Specifically for children?

COHEN: For children who are in the neglect and abuse system. As an independent eye, as in fact the judge's independent eye, with no ... you're not beholden to anyone except the best interests of the kid. You can bring a very independent perspective on what you felt was in the kid's best interest. I advocated in behalf of three kids. Over the period of maybe 14 or 15 years I was a CASA. I forget how long I was a CASA. The last kid I advocated for, I advocated for nine years. This kid, at the time I met him, was nine, and he was the oldest of five siblings. He was living with his grandmother and four younger siblings in Arthur Capper with his retarded, epileptic mother. I got to see life and what can and maybe what cannot be done for our neighbors from the perspective of the Collaborative. Being a CASA, becoming a Family Mediator where we do a lot of custody mediation, and then becoming a child protection mediator, where we mediate cases where there's an actual charge of abuse and neglect. But before the case goes to trial, they want to try and mediate the case, to see whether or not they can come up with an appropriate case plan, as well as work out what is called "a stipulation" or a kind of legal agreement between the government and the parties—the parents or grandparents, or whoever—as to what actually happened, and

therefore avoid the trauma of a trial. Does this make ...? I was profoundly fortunate to be able to see what's going on in our less fortunate community from a variety of perspectives. I was also on the Board of Directors of the Collaborative for a while. It's been a great experience for me.

DEUTSCH: What's become of the Collaborative?

COHEN: It's going well. Right now, they're going through some kind of change which I'm not totally familiar with. [Two sentences deleted at request of interviewee.] I don't know what's going on. But I do know people who worked there, and as far as I'm concerned, the entire Collaborative movement in Washington, DC, is an untold success story. There are Collaboratives in Ward Eight, in the Marshall Heights in Ward Seven. There's one in Brentwood, there's one in the North Capitol area, there's one in Georgia Ave, they're all over the eastern part of Washington. They really do a good job of bringing various groups together like this. That whole cauldron of experience has been a real gift to me. And then, simultaneously, (as long as I'm talking) I decided ... I didn't decide, it sort of felt right, to start a Jewish community up here.

DEUTSCH: Well, yeah, I was going to ...

COHEN: I was raised in a Reform background. I was never Bar Mitzvahed; it was sort of 'light-weight' Judaism. I wanted to be engaged in my faith, and I really couldn't find a community where I felt comfortable. So, I thought, why not try to start something up here, not that I had any expertise in leading services or anything like that, which I don't. My Hebrew is hardly sparse. But there were enough people I could find who would be willing to lead services. It took a while, but slowly, slowly, we created a community 10 or 11 years ago in our living room and then, thanks to the unbelievably profound generosity of Christ our Shepherd Church [Eighth and North Carolina Avenue SE] and its minister, Stuart McAlpine who is one of my dearest friends. Stuart offered—Christ our Shepherd Church offered the Havurah a place to worship.

DEUTSCH: A regular place to worship.

COHEN: Now, as well, we have our children's education program, and we've had it there for a number of years.

DEUTSCH: So how many members would you say the Havurah has now?

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TAPE 1/SIDE 2

COHEN: Havurah. We call it the Hill Havurah. It was an organic process. In time we decided to have an annual Seder, which we began, appropriately, at the Tried Stone Church of Christ, which was a former Greater Southeast synagogue or something like that, a long time ago. We bought a Torah, and had it “kashered.”

DEUTSCH: Now that’s a big deal, I guess, to buy a Torah.

COHEN: It’s a big deal. We had it “kashered.”

DEUTSCH: What does that mean?

COHEN: It means that the Torah ... In quotes, I guess. K-a-s-h-e-r-e-d. Like “kosher” One of our members was in Israel and happened to be in an antiquities store and she happened to ask the guy, “Do you have any old Torahs?” So he went upstairs to look. He could not understand why anyone would ever buy an old Torah. Get a new one! A new one costs \$25-35,000 because it takes a year to ...

DEUTSCH: Because they’re all hand-done?

COHEN: They’re hand-scribed.

DEUTSCH: And they’re all rolls. They’re not ...

COHEN: They’re all on some kind of parchment of some kind, skin of some kind. It’s a very involved process. She bought ... she came back with several for other communities, but the Havurah went through this debate: to buy or not to buy. Can we have it kashered, can we not have it kashered.

DEUTSCH: Kashered means declared ...?

COHEN: You don’t want to have a service ... you don’t want to use a Torah that’s not perfect, where all the letters are right. It is sort of “certified”, “kosher”. So we went through this process: to kasher or not to kasher, to buy or not to buy. We contacted a scribe, a man who actually does this. He’s a rabbi, lives out in Silver Spring. Where’s the big Jewish community? Lives out, I forget the name, Upper Wheaton. So he came by where the Torah happened to be at the time; looked at the Torah, and said “Look, if you don’t want it, I’ll buy it.” So we paid a minimum amount of money. We had a consecration ceremony in someone’s back yard here in Capitol Hill. We had it ... we took it to a Hebrew book store in Wheaton where there’s Menachem somebody who is a scribe and he has a machine where he literally goes through

the entire thing and checks every imperfection, and so the Torah is bona fide, “kasher”. We bought a prayer book ...

DEUTSCH: I just want to get back to the Torah for a minute. Where does the Torah live?

COHEN: In someone’s home.

DEUTSCH: It’s brought to each service?

COHEN: Yes.

DEUTSCH: Is it real big? I think of them as huge...

COHEN: The whole ...

DEUTSCH: The whole megillah? (Laughs)

COHEN: So anyway, we have this Torah, which is a big thing for us. We have the Yavna on the Hill. A yavna is ... I don’t have any—religious education programs call themselves yavna. Why yavna? Well, when the Romans were taking over Jerusalem, there was a well-known rabbi who really wanted to keep the faith alive, and somehow he was smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin and taken to a little village, somewhere near where Tel Aviv must be now, called Yavna and there he established, with the permission of the Romans, a little rabbinical school of some kind. The story has a million variations, Stephanie, so we decided to call ours Yavna on the Hill. I know where I grew up in Cincinnati, there must be a yavna ... I’m sure there are yavnas all over.

DEUTSCH: This is Yavna on the Hill.

COHEN: Yavna on the Hill. It meets Tuesday afternoons. It’s been going on for a number of years. Tuition ... these are professional teachers, they’re paid professional salaries. The kids are getting a modified Jewish education. Not full-time, but a Jewish education there learning Hebrew. We now have a Bat Mitzvah class, and we have about eight young girls; I wish we had some boys. We’ve already had several Bat Mitzvahs. Most of them have taken place at Sixth and I. We have a relationship with Sixth and I (the synagogue) The synagogue that used to be ... [it’s] near Chinatown.

DEUTSCH: It’s called the Historic ...

COHEN: Historic synagogue. It’s called—literally—SixthandI.org. We have a web site; we have high holiday services; and we had a Hanukah celebration where we simultaneously lit—thank God there was, I was wondering if the sprinkler system would go off—but 30 menorahs at one time. The thing that I feel

really good about is that a younger group of Jewish families are now taking over the leadership of the Havurah. I have not been chair for a number of years and it doesn't matter, because the critical thing for the life of the organization is for the people who are younger to take, move into leadership, and they are. And it's wonderful. It's growing. Knock on wood, we've been blessed. We've been blessed with our relationship with the Christ our Shepherd Church. The other thing that is so phenomenal is the acceptance among the rest of the greater Capitol Hill congregational community. We invited a number of ministers to attend our Torah (we called it actually a wedding where the congregation marries the Torah), but a number of ministers and their wives came to this ceremony. One of the things I felt was critically important for the Havurah to have a relationship with the rest of the congregations. With that, I asked Emily [Guthrie] if I could join the board of the Group Ministry (laughs) because I wanted there to be a Havurah presence there, and what better place for there to be a Havurah presence but with the Group Ministry? I think it is to the credit of this community that we have been as wonderfully accepted as part of this community. Example is Conrad Braaten down the street asking me a year or two ago "How about doing an interfaith Holocaust remembrance service?" A memorial service. Great! So we were able to enlist other congregations to take part in that. By being involved for three years in helping organize our interfaith Thanksgiving service.

DEUTSCH: Now whose idea was that? That is something that grew out of the Group Ministry.

COHEN: That predated me. I think Emily must have ... The first one was held at the Lutheran Church of the Reformation. I had just come on the board at the time. The next three I co-organized with others. We did one at Ebenezer United Methodist, then we did it at the Seventh Day Adventist, and we did it at Unity, and we most recently did it at Holy Comforter/St. Cyprian. [Statement deleted at request of interviewee.] Oh, we missed St. Marks! St. Marks was great, '09 was Holy Comforter, '08 was St. Marks. Again, the interfaith services were truly interfaith. We even had members of the Buddhist community here. Part of the wonderful thing about living up here, being part of this fabric of community ... are we on track?

DEUTSCH: (laughs) We're on track. I'll ask you a question. You talked about the fabric of community. It sounds like that's something you're interested in. What is the fabric of a community?

COHEN: Inclusivity. Acceptance. Engagement. It could be a lot better here, because a lot of our less fortunate neighbors, I don't think, are a part of this community enough. It's not a matter of fault-finding, this is not a matter ... I think it's more a matter of opportunity than anything else. It's not a matter of anybody being at fault, or not at fault, or anything like that. It's just finding the opportunities where we can engage more. I don't have any answers to that.

DEUTSCH: Maybe one of the things that starts to disappear when a community is in trouble *is* those opportunities to engage.

COHEN: Right.

DEUTSCH: Sig, you are the chairman of the Housing Advocacy Committee of the Capitol Hill Group Ministry?

COHEN: Right. The goal of the committee, very generally stated, is to find ways to improve, increase, and preserve affordable housing in and around Capitol Hill. We have this committee, which is an interesting committee insofar as it is comprised of members and the heads of other organizations, many of which are faith-based groups. What we try to do is to find ways of doing just that. The playground project was the idea of one of our members and we thought this was a good way of community building, by getting people living in Hopkins public housing and in others, and members of this committee, to work together to fund and build a playground where there was *nothing* for the kids at Hopkins. And damn little for the kids at Potomac Gardens. So, we did that, and I won't go into the mayoral engagement, but it was quite a lesson.

We also had a tenants' clinic, I guess a couple of months ago, and then, last winter we had a tenants' forum. We got speakers in to talk to people mainly about how to advocate for themselves, what to do if they're called to court, if they're summoned to court, what to do when they sign a lease, what to do if there are deficiencies in their unit or apartment, or their home which they're renting. Concomitantly, I am also a mediator at the Landlord-Tenant Court. I mediate at four venues at the court: Child Protection Mediation, which is neglect and abuse cases; Family, which is custody and divorce; divorce could include custody but many of the cases we do are custody cases because the parents are not married. I do small claims cases, and I do landlord-tenant cases. Many of them provide me with real insights into what life is like for less-fortunate people. A person is being evicted because they can't pay their rent. What is the best possible outcome? If that person has got to move, how can the landlord not necessarily lose property because rents are not being paid? It is as much in the interest of the landlord in terms of trying to forestall foreclosure and getting what is rightfully his or her rent, and at the same time, trying to ensure that the rights and expectations of the tenant are being—it's a balancing act. It's been fascinating. I just had a case before I came here where I put together a custody and visitation agreement for a couple that has a young five year old; they're not married. The case was brought to court because there was an allegation of neglect by the mother where the kid is living; the father wanted to get custody of the kid, so we had both a custody issue and a neglect issue. The child was returned to the mother, but the father wanted some more

engagement with his son, so the agreement that I was able to work out with them dealt with what would be the terms of custody and visitation for the parents, where they could both feel involved.

DEUTSCH: How many days a month do you do that kind of thing?

COHEN: It varies. Sometimes I have 10 or 12 cases a month. Then I work with a mediation practice group, work with a wonderful woman who's a retired Federal tax court judge. She started something called Beyond Dispute Associates; it's Beyonddispute.com. If you go there, you'll find a little more bio on me. I'm involved with that. We haven't had that many cases, but we're trying to pull up our cases. She does tax and probate mediation, both privately and for the court. She's very skilled and very committed to this field.

DEUTSCH: How did your experience working outside of the country, working in India, working in Pakistan, working in different countries—how did that influence what you did?

COHEN: It was profoundly important because you don't come away—if you're capable of learning anything, Stephanie, you learn that no culture's got first call on superiority. Every culture has its pluses and minuses, and whether it's a culture of affluence or the culture of poverty or the culture of India or the culture of the United States, what I learned was really [to] accept people on their own terms, without any kind of judgment whatsoever. This helped me as a suicide prevention person, when people would call up and, God knows the stuff I heard. Just listen to them, non-judgmentally, or when you're talking to people who are in a neglect or abuse situation in the court system, or whatever, is to be as available and as non-judgmental as possible. To respect where they are coming from.

DEUTSCH: What gave you the ability to do that? (laughs)

COHEN: I'm not saying I'm great at it, because I form judgments in my head a lot of times, but basically, this is why I feel good about my relationships with people whom I know in public housing or I feel good about my relationships in the clergy community. It has been a gift to me to have the experiences I've had. And, at the same time, to have the playing field be Capitol Hill. Not just Capitol Hill, but when you get down to Southwest. Let me tell you a little about this kid. This was really profound. This kid ...

DEUTSCH: This is your kid down at Arthur Capper?

COHEN: Yeah. So this kid didn't know whether he was father, big brother, or a kid. Because he had these four charges, his four younger siblings. They outgrew their little place in Arthur Capper. Grandma was able to find a double townhouse in James Creek, a public housing community just on the other side of South Capitol Street, and there they were. He, because of his own learning disabilities and God knows

what else going on in his life, managed to go to a different school every year for as many years as I was involved with him. The vicissitudes of their existence were unbelievable. At one time, the mother allowed her boyfriend to come back in the house, and he apparently fondled the oldest granddaughter. They called the cops, but because he was allowed back in the home, Child and Family Services took the kids out of the home. The home was split up again and only in time were the kids allowed to return to the home. Then (you won't believe this) "No good deed goes unpunished." Grandma wasn't always great about paying her rent. When she was summoned to court, she didn't appear. So she was in default, and one day the marshals turned up and put them all on the street. Now this is a grandmother who is caring for five grandchildren, trying to make ends meet, and she's put on the street. Did the property manager have it in for her because she didn't appear in court? Again, the family finally ends up down at the way-south Washington at what they call, kind of a residential community for families, a stalag down there which they closed. DC Village.

Meanwhile, this kid, whom I'm advocating for, is on his second or third tour in Oak Hill. In all, he did three tours in Oak Hill. Imagine going out to visit this kid! In Oak Hill, there's more barbed wire up there ... Finally, the last time I saw him, he was living in a kind of residential community over in Ward Eight with Peaceaholics; under the auspices of Peaceaholics. But Stephanie, he made the fatal mistake of going back to his own 'hood, and getting murdered about two years ago. After all the tsouris this kid went through, going to one school after another—different school every year. And then he was murdered; I don't know if they ever caught the killer. His funeral took place in a church, this big church up in Northeast on Nellie Burroughs somebody road up there. Stephanie, when you walked into this church, there's this wall they call The Wall of Shame where they have pictures the size of that painting there, drawings of all the kids who have been murdered in DC. This stuff is still going on. Children killing children, and children having babies. The kids I mediated in custody and visitation agreement would say—they couldn't have been more than 18, 19 years old—I'm asking them, "How do you want to do the visitation?" They'll say, "Whatever you say."

DEUTSCH: They're not really grown up.

COHEN: They're not ready for this. The fabric is there but it's not always whole cloth. There are much brighter people working at this than I am. I don't have a clue. You do what you can do. Anyway, that's my story. Almost. Can you make head or tail out of this? ... advocated for. His mother was a homeless drug addict, but she was in rehab, and he was living in a residential facility up near Dupont Circle, of all places. Let me tell you how they screw these kids over. This kid came out of Ward Seven or Ward Eight. Living now in Dupont Circle, whereas he should have been going to Eastern High School by rights, or to

Phelps or to one of the schools off of Benning Road, he had to go to Wilson! This kid had no more interest in going to Wilson than the man in the moon!

DEUTSCH: Had no friends there.

COHEN: He had nothing at Wilson. So instead of taking the Metro up to Tenleytown, he took the busses up there, and for one year this kid showed up for homeroom, where they took note that he was there, and never went to class. He hid out from class for an entire year.

Then, I had met a guy who was doing some good stuff at Lorton, when Lorton [prison] was around. I talked to the head of this residential community and I said to him, “What do you think about the idea of taking these kids out to Lorton just ... not that they’re juvenile delinquents, but just to let them know what’s going on? Let them see that side.” He said that was a good idea, so they got a bus and took the kids out to Lorton for one of these little sessions with a group of prisoners.

DEUTSCH: Like a field trip, sort of.

COHEN: An evening thing. They went out one evening. Susan and I went out there. We drove out there. We went into Lorton. We walked through one of the cell blocks with these kids, and then we met with a group—about four or five prisoners—sort of one of these sessions, not—where they tell them this is not exactly gracious living. These kids got a taste of vicariously what this life is like. The most indelible experience of that venture was—we were walking back to the bus, and the prisoners could walk with us only up to a certain point, and then we could walk through the gate, but not with them. One of the prisoners who was walking with us turned to one of the kids and said “Aren’t you so and so?” And the kid said yes. Now this kid had never committed an offense in his entire life. [The prisoner said] “Your uncle is in that cell block over there, and your father is in that cell block over there.” Now, what does that tell you? It left me with this impression, hmm, is this sort of the cycle of despair? And then for two years, (it’s on there), I worked for a group called the Alliance of Concern. For one year I worked for the Alliance of Concern, men with an ex-offender association here in DC. From 2001 ... there’s a group here called Search for Common Ground. Have you heard of Search for Common Ground?

DEUTSCH: No.

COHEN: Wonderful organization. It was founded about 1982. Founded by a visionary former Foreign Service officer, named John Marx. John Marx, having been in the Foreign Service (I think he did a tour in Vietnam) left the service with his vision, started Search for Common Ground.

END OF TAPE 1/SIDE 2

TAPE 2/SIDE 1

DEUTSCH: Testing. OK, here we go: Stephanie Deutsch with Sig Cohen, tape 2.

COHEN: Search for Common Ground. They had always worked overseas: in Israel (a Palestinian thing), in Cyprus, in all these different places they've worked. It is quite an accomplished organization. So the side story: one of the programs they wanted to do was try to find ways of getting both left-wing and right-wing U.S. organizations to agree on a way that ex-offenders can be brought back into society in a positive manner. I took over the project which was another of my failures. The Samaritans was one of my failures and then this was. To get started, a construction trades training program for ex-offenders in DC.

DEUTSCH: It's a great idea!

COHEN: A great idea. At least, in terms of my limited expertise, unfindable. So for two years I worked at that.

DEUTSCH: You worked at finding funds?

COHEN: Yeah, I worked at trying to organize such a program, with no background in construction trades or anything else, but I thought, they asked me to take this little project on. For a year I worked for Search for Common Ground, and then I moved over and worked for the Alliance of Concerned Men, which was interesting for me because, the Alliance of Concerned Men is comprised of ex-offenders.

DEUTSCH: The organization itself.

COHEN: The organization itself is comprised largely, if not all, ex-offenders. I got to meet a lot of wonderful men, most of whom had this in their backgrounds, but who were very, very committed to making a positive change in Washington. But that didn't work out. Some things work, some things don't.

DEUTSCH: If you talk a lot about how it's important being present and non-judgmental, but how do you take that and transfer it into action?

COHEN: The one thing I've learned from a number of people is "stay with the vision." Whatever it is. I've been fortunate enough in my life to meet a number of people who've "stayed with the vision". "Stay with the vision." The second ...

DEUTSCH: Can you give me an example?

COHEN: This guy John Marx, who started something out of nothing. Hal Gordon, when he started at CAG [Community Action Group]. Who's the wonderful woman who started "Sasha Bruce"? I forget her

name; Debby, Deborah Shore. I'm sure Nicky and Steve [Cymrot], when they started the Community Foundation. You stay with the vision. You stay with it.

The other lessons I've learned, not that they're so great, but it was critical in the life of the Havurah. The first lesson is not original with me. It's called "the ultimate victory is the group itself." Whatever happens, it's critically important to keep the group cohesive. The second lesson is (with the Havurah particularly) and I learned this—ever hear of a place called Esalen?

DEUTSCH: Um-hum. California?

COHEN: Yeah. It's a little piece of heaven. Susan and I were invited to spend five or six days in Esalen in 1981. The founder of Esalen is a guy ... [phone call interrupts] Michael Murphy had—remember, Esalen was developed at a time when there was a kind of blossoming of all these therapies and New Age kind of approaches to living, improving one's self and all that. He had a motto, which was "No one owns the flag." Which meant, particularly for the Havurah, that it could not be Reformed, Conservative, Reconstructionist, or Orthodox. It would be, for lack of a better label, Independent. So no one is going to stick a label on the Havurah, and then by process of elimination, "Well, that's not really where I belong." The name of the game in the Havurah is inclusivity. Not that I want to put a stamp on anything, but inclusivity is critical and welcoming. "No one owns the flag." The ultimate victory is the group itself, and no one owns the flag. The other thing is really taking ideas from the bottom up, rather than from the top down, because what's really important is that people own what they're doing. One of the things that we're wrestling with, and I've been wrestling with, is this Housing Advocacy Committee. It's the difference between community development and community organizing. Some groups are much more interested in organizing the community. It's sort of a shade of difference. How do you develop community? How do you build community? I think it's different than how you organize community.

DEUTSCH: That's very interesting. Because in a way, you can't organize unless there's a community ... the community has to be built.

COHEN: Exactly. These are concepts that I'm really fascinated with.

DEUTSCH: So you see yourself as a facilitator, for a group like the Havurah.

COHEN: Totally. And the Housing Advocacy Committee. I've been lucky to have learned about mediation, and that's what mediators do, obviously. There are things I feel strongly about, and if necessary, I'll express my views about some things. But, how many groups fall apart because of some kind of internal dissension that could have been avoided. They lose their organic spark; they lose their

capacity to grow, because one or another person has decided to inject a level of negativism. Well, if you can somehow work with that, and keep that dissension minimal, your chances of success are greater.

DEUTSCH: So what are your future ... do you have some future projects?

COHEN: Yes, if you turn that off.

END OF INTERVIEW