

So good morning, Mr. Cohn. And it's nice to be able to speak this morning to be able to wrap up our interview. And if I recall, we were coming close to the end of your service in Germany after the war had ended. And you had been responsible for a number of different documents to be sent back to the States. And you also shed a little bit of light on some of the black marketeering that was taking place at the time, and spoke a little bit about your post-war duty stations when you were back in Germany.

But I want to go back right now to returning home in 1946, and the point at which you finally knock on the door after having walked around the block and see your parents again. It was a sad occasion in that you had your father for only a couple of weeks after that. Was he already doing poorly when you returned?

No. I had no idea that the end stage was coming so quickly. He had always had some heart problems, but he didn't seem that different to me when I came back. I certainly hadn't expected that within a week or so after my return, he would have his fatal heart attack.

I see, that's what it was. Did you, in that time, have any chance to talk to him about any aspect of your experiences after being in Europe? I mean, from the time that you were deployed to the time that you came back.

I just never talked about it. The only thing that happened was that I had come back with a 45 caliber pistol that I had, you might say liberated, overseas. And he was very aghast about it and asked me to get rid of it. And I did get rid of it. So we were at peace in that regard. But I never talked about it at all. And I never talked about it to my mother either.

Well that was my next question. OK. Do you remember the first time you did start talking about these experiences, and to whom?

Well that's a good question. Once in a while, some item came up. I remember the time when a friend of mine suddenly told me he was an anti-Semite.

That's right.

Those little things did come up in conversation over the years. But as far as sitting down and talking about my entire experience, that didn't happen until I was interviewed by the Shoah people, Spielberg's debriefing.

So that was the first time?

Yes, that was the first time I talked about it in full.

And that would have been what year?

Goodness, I don't know. It was probably 30 years ago or more.

Well it could be that-- most of those interviews took place in the 1990s.

I think that's probably correct. Yes.

OK. So that means almost a half century, not quite a half century, but almost.

Yes.

Or indeed about that much time because '45 to '95 is 50 years. And I don't know exactly when your interview would have taken place. But if it's during that decade, it easily could have been more than 50 years later. Did you ever talk to your kids about any aspect of this experience?

I only have one daughter.

I see.

Over time, yes, we had certain discussions because she heard me-- in the last 10 years, I've been asked to talk about it in almost every place, both on the Holocaust portion as well as my army career portion. And she listened in on many of these things, just as my wife listened in. But I really never sat down with either one of them to give my story because I know they had heard what I've said before, and it would just be repetitive.

I see. So I mean that is-- it's after the Spielberg interview that you start speaking more publicly.

That's correct, yes.

And particularly in the last decade, so that would be like from 2010 to now, which is 2020. Approximately, I'm not holding you strictly to those dates.

Actually, it was a little earlier because my first trip to Russia was in 2005, and that's when it all started.

Really? Really? And you spoke publicly at that commemoration of the meeting of the American and Soviet soldiers at the Elbe.

Well in 2005, I think I told you that a Russian speaking person went with me, and he made the speech. But in 2010, I was sitting comfortably, then one of the ladies that were chaperoning me said-- she said, oh, by the way, why don't you make the talk and tell him as to what happened at the Elbe.

So I had a napkin and I had to scratch out a couple of things that I was going to say. And then I got up and started to talk, but it was very easy because I could only talk one sentence because they had to translate it.

Exactly.

So I had lots of time to think about the next sentence.

OK.

So that went--

Do you remember some of what you said?

Well, I told them the story of how we got to the Elbe and how we were received on the Russian side, and that I was 19 years old and had never had any vodka. But when I put it on the paper, they said that he was 19 years old, and when they offered vodka, he was very anxious to get it. They turned it all around. That's life.

Yes. Yes, it is. So that's in 2010, yes?

Yes, that was 2010.

OK. When did you come to the museum for the first time to visit it? And I'm referring now to our US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

To visit where?

The museum. The Holocaust Museum.

You know, I don't really remember how many years back it was. But there were people who knew that I was a refugee and they asked me to take them to the museum. And I took them to the museum and I explained certain things as we

went along, so I was sort of a docent to take them through the museum without being trained as such. And that happened probably over a dozen times that I took people through the museum over the years.

Wow.

Now how many times-- it must have been around 2,000 or so.

OK. And had you, yourself, visited it before then?

Well, yes, I had visited it before with my wife. We went through it. And that was before the turn of the century, I guess.

In the '90s?

Yeah. Of course, I ended up making a donation, a monthly donation to the museum, so they always sent me tickets.

I see.

And I use these tickets to take friends through the museum.

And had you ever visited any other Holocaust related museums or expositions or installations or things like that?

Only when I went back to Germany one time. I went to Dachau. I'm sure of that.

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Dachau was made into a Memorial site, I believe.

Yes, yes.

Yeah. Have you ever been to Auschwitz?

No.

OK.

No, I never went to Poland.

OK. And when you visited the museum, did you feel any kind of special connection to it? I mean, clearly if you brought visitors and acted as their guide for a dozen times, that's a lot.

Yes, of course. But for lots of luck that we had, I could have been right in there. So it certainly shakes you because you identify that with any little misstep, and I could have been eliminated.

Yeah.

I remember reading that the last Jews of Breslau were taken out into a field in Poland and shot. And that was just before Pearl Harbor. It was in December, 19-- I guess it was the last of November, 1941.

So that's just over three years after you have left the country-- after you leave with your mother. So had you stayed--

I would have been six years old.

Yeah. Yeah.

You know, those are the things that shake you up--

Yeah.

--and make you a believer.

Yeah. Did you ever encounter, in post-war years, people who doubted the Holocaust? I mean, personally encountered them.

I never had a discussion with anybody who said that this didn't happen, no. Of course, I read a lot of items of people being that way and being challenged, and even in court in some places. But no, I never encountered anyone who said that to me because even if they thought that, they probably wouldn't bring it up to me when if they knew what my background was.

Well, there is a spectrum of Holocaust denial, from outright it never happened to it's not as bad as they say, which is like on a continuum. That yes, there something going on, but not as bad, not as much, not as-- all of that.

Yeah. Yeah.

Did you ever come across that kind of spectrum? No, nobody argued that with me at all.

OK. OK. And when--

The numbers don't really come up most of the time. But even the idea of oh, this thing wasn't quite as bad as they say. Nobody ever said that to me either.

OK. OK. Well, that's good to know.

Well, I may have been just lucky. I don't know.

Yeah. When did your connection to the museum become closer?

That only happened very recently, only about a year or so ago. I had plans to get to the museum and help them, particularly I thought I could do some speeches in support of the program that the museum had to advise people about the Holocaust. Because I was asked to make a lot of speeches along the way by the various religious groups, temples. And the Jewish Community Center got a hold of me and sent me out to schools and various other places.

And I thought I should do it at the museum, and I probably started thinking about it over five years ago. But at that time, I was told I had to have put in time at the museum for about once a week or so. And I just didn't have the time to do that. So that discouraged me. And it was just about a year ago that I finally enrolled myself.

And I do have some problems hearing so while I would have enjoyed meeting the people in the museum, I would have had lots of trouble hearing certain people with a certain pitch of their voice. So I discouraged that for myself. And I ended up taking audio-- just what we're doing right now, and summarizing it for them. And that's what I've been doing over the last year.

OK. So explain that to me. Does that mean you acted as a guide for groups or for individuals at the museum?

I don't know. I do this at home. I receive-- it's a video, but it's not a video. You don't see anything. It's just a voice recording, and I summarize. The voice recording might be about an hour, and I put it all in one or two paragraphs and send it back.

And what kind of voice recording is this? I mean, is it--

Done in 1994. Interviews with military, usually military personnel who were liberating a concentration camp. But then there were also a few of POWs who were in German POW camps and how they survived that. Those are the type of

interviews that I summarize.

OK. And do you know-- are they exactly the same kind of interviews that we're conducting now? Or were they part of, let's say, some kind of museum program that was a public program?

Well, I think it's the same thing what you're doing right now.

OK.

But it was '94.

OK. OK. Well that's very valuable. And it makes an awful lot of sense to kind of take advantage of your military background and have you summarize the US military, let's say, themed interviews. Because--

Yeah, that makes sense because I could tell what they were saying as to whether we're scientists or whatever, and I knew what they were talking about. They would talk about a battalion or they were talking about a regiment or whatever. So that was helpful. On the other hand, there were some interviews that I just couldn't understand what they were saying, and then she just gave me another one.

OK.

[INAUDIBLE]

Is this done through the Survivor Affairs Office?

I guess so. I'm not sure what the structure was of the people.

Yeah. That's OK.

[INAUDIBLE]. I don't know if you know her, but she does not work at the museum. She's out of town.

Oh, I know who this. This is our colleague. Yes. Yes, I know her. Yes, thank you.

She's the one who gets all my material.

OK. Has your museum connection also evolved to actually being there, if not once a week how they were originally suggesting it, but let's say, meeting some of the other survivors or taking part in any of the interactions with the public?

I started going to the meetings that they had once a month at the museum. And then of course, the virus came and now we do it virtually once a week. And on Friday, they have an hour and a half-- and most of the time, I try to participate.

OK.

But sometimes it interferes with some other things.

Oh, OK. And--

It's a funny thing. Here we're all isolated and somehow it all gets very, very busy. I got so involved with a lot of things, like the Russians still come with me. Tomorrow they want me to have an interview outside because they can't come in. So I go to the gate and interview me.

How interesting.

They have a medal that they want to give me, and they're still waiting for an occasion when they can give it to me. It's

amazing how you get involved in some of these things.

Well you know, when I hear things like that it sounds all good. Because it means we still keep busy, we're relevant.

Yes. Yes. I don't sit in a rocking chair. That's what's good about it.

Yeah. Yeah. And the technology has allowed us to still keep doing things, which is the upside of it despite all the complications that can exist. This is one of the benefits, that technology--

The museum is very good about it. They're presenting all kinds of programs. You can't really participate in all of them because there's that much of it. But it's a wonderful thing because they tell you what it is that they are going to present and then you decide if you can do it, and if you've got the time and whatnot. They would keep me busy just doing things that the museum is presenting.

But I got requirements here in the retirement community and various other things. My old military police organization in this area keeps me busy. So there are a lot of other items that interfere with dedicating my work to the museum.

There's nothing like being busy when you're retired. You know? You were never so busy when you were working, huh?

That's right.

That's what I hear from a lot of people, that they thought that there'd be oodles of time.

The point is, I'm so busy, I would just never have time to go back to work.

Exactly. Exactly. So let me ask you this then. After having such a long connection, even if it might not have been a formal connection to the volunteer network at the museum, but nevertheless if you started visiting soon after it opened in the '90s, and on your own took over a dozen groups of people or individuals through the exhibit, I'd like to ask you, what do you think about the purpose of this museum? How do you understand that?

Well it's simply don't forget. Remember what the heck happened and how bad it was. To tell people how it originated and to be careful that you don't want to duplicate that ever again in the future. I think that's the purpose of the museum. And I'm all in favor of that, believe me.

Do you think they do it well? Do you think they achieve that?

Oh, yeah. It's an excellent museum. It historically provides the whole progression of how it was before they even got to power, and how the power was used to inflict the damage that they were inflicting, not only on the Jews but on the world really. This one guy, this maniac who was supported by one country. And when you understand what a dictator can do to the world, I think it should have everyone pay attention to their own government.

That's a powerful message.

It is. Yeah. And they're doing it well.

Did you ever follow the controversies before the museum even opened and soon afterwards about, well this didn't happen in the United States. Why should we have a museum in Washington that is, let's say close to the National Mall? It doesn't reflect US history. And so why have this rather than any other thing that happened around the world? Had you ever heard of this argument?

Yes, I did hear that when they were debating about whether or not to put a museum up on the mall. Yes, I did hear that.

And how do you react to it as somebody who--

Well, in one sense, I think there were some honest people who really thought this was not an American problem. This was a problem overseas. And they were a little shortsighted that they didn't recognize that even though it was a problem overseas, it kicked right back into the United States when even overtly you had a Nazi party over here before World War II started. Kuhn, I believe, was the man who was in charge of it.

So it did in fact hit the United States. And it certainly got us into the war because of this maniac, and killed a lot of Americans because of it. So when somebody really made others stop and think of how, in fact did affect the Americans, and when they of course, made the wise decision to put this museum on the mall. I think that once the rationale of everything seemed to win over these other honest people who were wrong. And I think it all worked out very well.

Well, it is true. I believe it is either the first or the second most visited museum in Washington DC. So clearly something's being done right.

Yes.

Yeah.

You're completely right.

What relevance do you think it has for Americans?

Well, I wouldn't want to get into the politics. But there are things that are happening today right here in the United States where you all start to think, hey, wait a second. Be careful. You may be going on the wrong track here. So let's just stop and think and see what we want to do.

I see.

It absolutely has relevance for us, even just today. Not necessarily just yesterday, but it's relevant today.

Well, unfortunately so. I guess many people would say it would be good if the kinds of developments that resulted in the Holocaust, that those types of processes or dangers or other forces were really historical rather than current.

Oh that's a foolish thought because history can very definitely repeat itself, contingent on what the situation is on the ground. Now if you have a good economy and everything is blooming and whatnot, sure that would be very, very difficult to get into that kind of situation. But remember, Germany was in a very bad economic state when all this happened.

Yes.

When you have a bad economy, that's when the real danger comes in. But even before that, you should know that you don't want to lay the groundwork to make it easy for a dictator to come in and grab it and exploit it if the economy turns sour. So action needs to be taken at any time to preclude the various steps that had been taken in Germany to get to the point before Hitler even took the power. That's where you have to focus your attention.

What happened in Germany before the power grab by Hitler? And that is the type of thing that we're debating today, whether it should be done or should not be done, whether this is a mistake and could lead towards a dictatorship or whether this is really nothing at all and can be disregarded as just one of these political blips that occurs.

So if I understand it, you're talking about the weakening of Democratic institutions.

Absolutely.

OK.

You're putting it very well, yes.

Yeah. And what happens when Democratic institutions are weakened? And do we want to go there?

That's right.

Yeah.

That's precisely what the museum is doing. It showed exactly what happened and how it could happen any place.

So that speaks much more to the universality of the message, of the universality of the danger.

I think it is a universality. It can happen anywhere, and it can happen to us even though lots of people say, no, it could never happen in the United States. I am not a subscriber to that. I think there's a danger always, every place, unless people take care and remember that there is a value-- not only a value, it's an existential requirement to preserve the Democratic process.

Couldn't have said it better. Couldn't have said it better. Thank you, Mr. Cohn. Is there anything else that you'd like to add to all that we've talked about today and yesterday? To our interview, any thoughts that you'd like to leave for those who would be listening to this in the future?

Well, I think we had just summarized it. The thought is listen, politics is very important. And particularly for the young people, they think we can make things easier by just ignoring the Democratic process. But making it easy is not the idea and the reason for government. The reason for government is to make sure that everybody's included, that there's care taken to include everybody into the economy, into the Democratic process, into the politics, into the vote.

The universality of this is what is important and not the ease. So be careful when you make decisions. Think of things, not how you can get it done real quick and fast, but how you get it done by bringing everybody along and starting to talk to each other. The unfortunate part of what is happening today, in my mind, is that the Republicans and the Democrats don't talk to each other anymore. Each one has their own agenda and they go their way and they forget that the only way things get done is when you get the plurality working together towards a goal.

And the country is 50/50, more or less. Sometimes it's a little bit more on one side, a little bit more on the other, but the country is pretty well divided 50/50. And that is seen by the parties. So any party can't just go plowing ahead and do what they want to do. They got to talk to each other and come up to a consensus, and then move ahead slowly and get things done with everybody behind it. And everybody may not be completely happy and hilarious that they won, but rather they are going to be content because they have accomplished something and it's working and people are happy overall. And that's all I got.

Thank you. Thank you. And I will say then with those words, this concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interview with Mr Frank Cohn. Conducted over two days June 24 and June 25, 2020. With you, Mr. Cohn, being in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and I in Falls Church, Virginia. But both of us in the Washington Metropolitan area and both of us with a connection to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. Thank you, again.

The only thing I could add is that over the years, I did get promoted. I didn't get out of the army as a Staff Sergeant. I ended up as a Colonel.

Then in that case, thank you, Colonel. Thank you, Colonel Cohn. All right, then. Bye, bye for now.