The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ROBERTA COHEN

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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Q: Today is 26 September 2008. This is an interview with Roberta Cohen. When and where were you born?

COHEN: I was born in New York City on February 5, 1940.

Q: Let's start with the family. What do you know about the origins of the family?

COHEN: Both sides of the family, all four grandparents, came from Russia -- from Kharkov in the Ukraine; Minsk in Belarus; and in or around Vilna, Lithuania, all part of Russia at that time. They immigrated to the States for different reasons. One grandfather deserted from the Czar's army in 1904/5 because he didn't want to fight in the Russo-Japanese War. The other came because of discrimination against Jews in Russia and opportunity in America. When one of my grandmothers died, she left $1000 to each granddaughter and I used mine to visit the Soviet Union in on a citizens exchange tour and found some family members who remained.

Q: Where were they at that time?

COHEN: In Kharkov, the Ukraine. Originally they came from Lithuania. All family members who remained in Lithuania perished during the Holocaust. The ones in Kharkov managed to escape by fleeing to Kyrgyz in central Asia. When the war ended, they returned to Kharkov and helped rebuild the city and that is where I found them so I know a bit more about my mother's side of the family than my father's in Belarus. But one overriding sentiment I felt in the case of all four grandparents was that they sought a country where they could feel safe and make a better living. So the United States for them represented a place of opportunity, where they would not be subjected to government sanctioned discrimination and worse, which gave them hope for the future. Even though as immigrants they faced many problems in the United States, I believe they found the United States to be a haven, and I developed a view of the country as one that played a leading role in the world when it came to people's survival.

Q: Do you know what sort of occupations both sides of your family had back in Russia?

COHEN: Well my grandfather on my mother's side was a soldier in the Tsar's army. I believe his parents worked at some small trade in Vilna or around Vilna. I was told by my relatives in Kharkov that my grandmother's family had a farm in Shaulai (near Vilna)

which employed quite a number of people. I am not so sure about the occupations of my father's father in Minsk except that he came to the States and seemed savvy with regard to business. None of the grandparents who came to the States had advanced education, although when I met my mother's side of the family living in Kharkov in 1969, I found that all of them had attended university. One was an architect; another, the chief tuberculosis doctor in the city, and others, biologists and civil engineers. I remember thinking that the relatives in Russia all had university training, including the older ones, whereas only the children of those who came to the States had that opportunity.

Q: Well back then quite frankly very few Americans did. In my interviews now I am still talking to people whose parents, the majority of whom, were not college graduates. This will change as the new generation comes up. But the people I am talking to now came into the Foreign Service during the 60's and 70's. Most of their parents, including mine, didn't have a college education. They educated themselves, probably better learned than the present generation who were spoon fed. But were your grandparents alive when you…

COHEN: Yes, very much so, my mother's parents lived in the same building we did in the Bronx when I was growing up and my father's parents lived nearby. They were all a part of my life and seemed very 'authentic' to me, especially my mother's parents because they didn't try to Americanize. My grandfather Rubin Israel peddled goods on the lower east side and wore high black boots while my grandmother Sarah Pearlstein Israel wore her hair in a bun, ground her own meat, and cooked borscht, tzimmes and other East European specialties. They lived in a small, darkish sparsely furnished apartment with a huge old grandfather clock that ticked all the time and rang on the hour. I remember grandma Sarah sitting in the darkened kitchen, with flickering 'yahrzeit' candles [which memorialize the dead in the Jewish religion] and listening to a radio station that read out the names of Jews in East European cities and villages who had been murdered by the Nazis. Some of these names were relatives or friends she knew and she would cry. I sometimes draw a line from my later professional life to that scene in the kitchen with grandma Sarah crying. My father's parents, grandfather Nathan Cohen and grandma Molly Rubenstein experienced more of the American dream. They came to enjoy a somewhat affluent lifestyle, moving from a tenement on Rivington Street on the lower east side of New York to a large opulently furnished apartment on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. My grandfather became successful in the real estate business and he took his family on first class tours of Europe and Egypt before the war. My grandmother Molly wore lace and silk dresses and had silver combs and brushes on a glass tray in her bedroom, which I'd never seen before and liked to look at. Nathan, as patriarch of my father's family, was imperious. But during the depression, they suffered, and banks grandpa Nathan thought would help him did not, he said, because he was Jewish.

Let me say a word about the importance of education to the family, especially to Sarah, my mother's mother. Although none of my grandparents had a college education, and possibly not even high school, it was very important to them that their children and grandchildren go to the university. We all knew that we had to go to college, and I was

the first one in the family to go to an Ivy League school. My father always regretted that he didn't go to college; as the oldest son, he was expected to join his father after high school in the real estate business. My mother on the other hand graduated from Hunter College and became a math teacher in the New York City public schools and also was a piano teacher. I found it interesting that when my Russian relatives on my mother's side moved to New York in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, they carried the same message. Alla and Viktor arrived with little because they were not allowed to take out more than $750 per person and went through hard years in New York City but had this overriding goal that their children receive a good education. Their son Larry is now a medical doctor and their daughter Kate a physician's assistant, married to Mattvei, a medical doctor. The value and importance of education runs strongly through this family.

Q: This is a motif that goes through immigrant communities so much, and it is the answer to many things. Speaking of Russia, when you were a kid was there a Russian flavor to things? "Watch out, the Cossacks could get you." Or something like that? How did Russia stand?

COHEN: Russia was the 'old country,' which my grandparents left and which my parents wanted us to forget about. Yet grandma Sarah drank tea from a glass, and plucked chickens in her kitchen, especially every Friday night when family members gathered. And grandpa Rubin, although in this country for more than 60 years, saluted the Tsar in Russian when he died -- I was in the room -- and he gave me a large 19th century silver coin with Tsar Nicholas II on it. I carried it around as a good luck charm for years but one day a pickpocket at Bloomingdales stole my wallet and I lost the coin. How I miss that coin! Yet my parents wanted their children to be 'Yankees' and not associated with the 'old country.' A teacher was brought to the house to teach us good English. And my sister and I were sent to a reform Jewish temple, even though our parents belonged to an orthodox synagogue. The reform temple was progressive, men and women sat together, there was a choir and organ music like in a church, and the rabbi emphasized ethical and moral issues rather than rituals. The teachers were also anti-Zionist. They insisted that Jews had to be part of the American mainstream and that there shouldn't be a separate Jewish state. My parents, however, were ardent Zionists. So I lived with a contradiction.

Q: Did your parents realize what they were doing?

COHEN: I'm not sure, but something was amiss -- my father was the president of the local chapter of the Zionist organization, my mother was the president of the local chapter of Hadassah and they went around making speeches and collecting money for the State of Israel, and urging United States recognition of the State. When President Truman extended recognition, it was a day for celebration in our house. Yet there I was in a Sunday school where teachers advocated that Jews assimilate in their own countries, and for my confirmation assigned me to speak about the contribution of American Jewish women to the American Revolution -- like Rebecca Gratz. I remember being uncomfortable giving that speech because it seemed to be trying too hard to show "we belong." I also didn't identify heavily with the Yankee experience. My grandfather downstairs with the big black boots and twinkly blue eyes made his mark on me.

Q: What was the language at home?

COHEN: English. In fact, my parents would not speak anything but English to their children and did not want us to learn Yiddish or Russian, which our grandparents spoke. Again, this was part of becoming a Yankee. My mother, although born in the States, didn't speak English when she started school, and the teachers made fun of her, called her 'a green horn.' Because she didn't want my sister or me to experience that, she had an elocution teacher come to the Bronx to teach us the King's English when I was only four or five years old. I found her a royal pain in the neck but I never sounded like a foreigner or developed a full blown New York accent.

Q: Where did your family fall politically on the American spectrum?

COHEN: Democrats all the way.

Q: Did your family discuss issues and let you speak up?

COHEN: My father would bring me into discussions with different visitors because I was interested in political events. I was about 10 when the Korean War broke out and I read newspaper articles every day and listened to the radio reports. So when company came, my father would call me into the living room to talk about the Korean War. I remember feeling upset about the treatment of American POWs. There was also the McCarthy period that made the dinner table. Many of the teachers that my mother had taught with were on the lists in the newspapers.

Q: Are you talking about the black lists?

COHEN: Yes, the black lists. These teachers had joined the teacher's union whereas my mother, I believe at my grandmother's urging, had not. Had she done so, she would have been blacklisted like her colleagues. The McCarthy hearings had an impact on me because my parents knew people who had joined unions or belonged to clubs or organizations that were said to be pro-communist and whose careers and reputations were tarnished or ruined. At public school, my ninth grade social studies teacher Miss Purcell defended McCarthy and the way he went about searching out communists but my parents disagreed. A kid at school Eddie Cohen -- no relation -- got up and challenged the teacher and a number of us privately cheered him on. Obviously, other parents disagreed as well. Basically, my parents were appalled but also frightened by McCarthy's fear tactics and ability to destroy lives. So my mother warned us against joining anything at high school or college. Later on, when I began to go to social or political meetings around an issue, and names were called for, I used to sign in Lady Esmeralda. The execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg also hit home because capital punishment was used, the two were Jewish, and it was so soon after the Holocaust. So the war in Korea, the McCarthy blacklists and the creation of the State of Israel were all issues that were discussed at home and had impact on my life.

Q: Can you think of any books that you read as a young kid that particularly interested you, or series of books?

COHEN: Yes, *The Ox Bow Incident* about a lynching which raised human rights and justice issues. I also liked *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates* because it took place in a foreign country, and reading about other cultures interested me. I remember too reading *Of Human Bondage* by Somerset Maugham well before I could understand it. The book was hundreds of pages long and I remember the author comparing life to a Persian rug, which I liked although I don't think I ever saw a Persian rug. The Nancy Drew and Bobbsey twin books that I was expected to read did not interest me much. I preferred books with a social message, and I liked reading plays of Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller in my teenage years. I had the good fortune of meeting them both later in life.

Q: Let's talk a little about the neighborhood. I have talked to several people who grew up in the Bronx and were Jewish. They said it wasn't until they got out and went away to college that they realized there were other people in the world besides Jews. Did you find this in the Bronx?

COHEN: Well, I did not like being confined in a ghetto atmosphere and made an effort to make friends outside the box. My best friend in the fifth and sixth grades was a Christian, Jeanie Brinkman. And even earlier in the fourth grade, I befriended the one black boy in my class. I even wrote an essay at the time about the need to reach out to other people, which the vice principal read out to the school. The essay spoke about the importance of tolerance and appreciating other people. I did not agree with the general view that you must stay with your own kind. In fact, my first serious boyfriend was Italian, not Jewish, and my husband is not Jewish. The pressure to stay close to the Jewish community arose of course out of personal and historical experiences and fears, some well justified. But I was influenced by the rabbi at Tremont Temple where I was confirmed at 15 or 16, Rabbi Albert Goldstein. I remember specifically asking him what he thought of intermarriage. He was not opposed to it. He said it could work with enough love but he cautioned that it added another difficulty to one's life. His views on ethical issues had a strong impact on me.

Q: Just for people who are looking at social history, I am a generation before you. I was born in 1928. I remember as a kid being told, you really don't want to marry a Catholic girl. I had become Episcopalian. There were such attitudes all around. Baptist kids were told you better marry within the Baptist church. Most of it really started breaking down in the early 1960s.

COHEN: My father told me never to marry a Christian. Were you to get into an argument, he said, your husband would call you a 'dirty Jew.' He wanted to protect me. My mother told me not to wear drop earrings, because I had dark hair and dark eyes and would be mistaken for an Italian – I don't know what was supposed to happen then. I was also told to keep away from the Irish because they drank too much -- there was an Irish policeman in the building we lived and he used to get drunk and beat up his wife. There were also fights between Jewish and Catholic kids on the streets. The boys from

parochial schools used to chase the Jewish kids and say, "You killed Christ." And we would yell back, "He was Jewish." So this 'stick with your own kind' religious and ethnic rivalries were a part of the tenor of the time and the lingo of the streets in the Bronx.

Q: The street life of a major city, particularly New York, is really something else. I can recall back when I got out of the air force in '54 I was at a boarding house in Boston where I was going to Boston University, and there was an Irish guy from Ireland, a few years older, in his mid 20's. And there was a Jewish student my age there. I remember this Irish guy got quite drunk and started saying 'you are a Christ killer' to the Jewish student. This sort of thing just shocked me, that it still existed. It gives you a spirit of the times. What was elementary school like? How did you find that?

COHEN: I liked P.S. 28 a lot except for math which became problematic for me throughout my life linked to my mother's being a math teacher. In the fifth and sixth grades, I was in a special (SP) class of intellectually gifted children. IQ tests were given to students in New York City and those over a certain level were placed in special classes where we did creative things I really enjoyed. We were given advanced books to read and we got to do creative artwork, like building Eiffel Towers or sewing dolls from foreign lands. I was fascinated by travel and foreign countries. I made very good friends there and had a 'boyfriend' for the first time, Martin Eisenberg and he and his parents asked me out on a date! At the same time, the SP students were sometimes taunted by other students at the school who would call us names for being 'too smart' or thinking we were better than others. At least one of my cousins and my sister I think were also resentful of my being in the special class. The class brought together students from different parts of the city and we were together for two years.

Q: How about the greater New York while you were in elementary and up through the high school level? How much were the riches of New York City used, for example museums, theaters and that sort of thing?

COHEN: Mine was not an intellectual or highly cultured family so I don't recall excursions to art museums (other than the natural history museum with the huge dinosaur), theatre or ballet. But I do remember going to Broadway musicals. I must have been 5 or 6 when my parents took me to see Carousel. And I saw South Pacific, when I was 9 or 10 (and fell in love with Bill Tabard who sang "You've got to be carefully taught" about inter-racial relations), and I also remember my first opera at the Met (Metropolitan Opera) – Aida - a year or two later. But above all, I remember a family excursion to Washington DC in 1948 when I was eight years old. We were actually three families so there were 12 of us. Driving down to Washington was a big event in those days. My father made reservations I believe at the Willard Hotel under the name Cohen. Midway there, he called to let the hotel know exactly where we were and that we would be arriving at such and such time. When we arrived, however, the hotel staff told my father that they had no rooms for us, and had put us up at another hotel under the name Smith.

Q: One only has to see the movie Gentleman's Agreement.

COHEN: Yes, and my father accepted the arrangement because he really had no choice. But I remember the look on his face. I had learned at school about freedom and democracy and why we fought World War II; and I had learned at Tremont Temple about tolerance, yet here we were in the capital of the United States going to see all these monuments and my family and I were not considered acceptable because we were Jewish.

The experience came back to me forty years later when I was in Bulgaria as part of a team sent by NDI [the National Democratic Institute of International Affairs] to talk to the public about human rights and democracy. People came in droves to theaters and other public buildings. Well, among them were Muslims who under the communist regime had been forced to change their names so that they would fit into the majority. Now with the fall of the Zhivkov regime, people asked me whether the change of names violated their human rights. I was suddenly reminded of my trip to Washington DC. So I told the audience that their names are their identity, and that it is their right to keep their names; that is who they are; no government could take that away from them. And I told them about my trip to Washington and having to assume the name Smith, although it was not government directed. So I realized in the middle of some Bulgarian town that the main reason I had kept my own name when I married was not because of professional reasons, or feminism but because of what happened at that hotel in Washington.

Q: Now for high school, where did you go to high school?

COHEN: I went to William Howard Taft High School.

Q: This was from when to when?

COHEN: Well, after public school I went to a junior high school 117 (1950-1953), also known as Wade Junior High. That's the school, by the way where Lee Harvey Oswald went a number of years earlier.

Q: This was before the assassination?

COHEN: Well before. The other 'famous' person in the neighborhood was Roy Cohn, whose father had a relationship with mine.

Q: Oh boy. One has to look at the McCarthy period to understand who he was.

COHEN: Exactly. He was chief counsel to Senator McCarthy. As for junior high, I was again placed in a special class. At about age 11, another IQ test was given so I continued with the intellectually gifted children and we skipped the eighth grade together and went straight to the 9th. But at this point in my life – around 13 -- I yearned to be among everyday 'ordinary' teenagers and not the super smart -- today's 'geeks.' I developed this

yen to be with 'the people' as I called them. Oh I had friends at school; I was even elected class president in the 9th grade. But I wanted something different.

Q: I mean it is sort of an unusual attitude, you know, being with people of your own intellectual curiosities and wanting to go back to a different set of people.

COHEN: Well beyond the pop culture yen, I didn't want to go the Bronx High School of Science, where my teacher and mother expected me to go and where lots of my class were going. I refused even to take the test. Although the school said I had a high math IQ, math was psychologically problematic for me and I wanted to stay away from the heavy dose of math and science that the school was known for. Later I realized I made a mistake because Science would have given me terrific preparation for college.

Q: Well let's talk about high school. This would be...

COHEN: 1953. I entered high school at age 13 and graduated in 1956 at age 16. The school was huge, with maybe hundreds of students in the graduating class. Well I had asked for 'the people,' and there they were. In my homeroom class were some tough characters -- both boys and girls. There were gangs at the school and some carried switchblades. So there I was from this sheltered four year experience in a special class of intellectually gifted children to a homeroom with 'blackboard jungle' types who didn't want to learn very much and were also a few years older than me. Clearly I didn't fit. Why I thought I would is beyond me today. Somewhere in my junior or senior year the school put together classes of kids who had high grades and wanted to go on to college and then the classes became better and I made very good friends, some of whom I'm still in touch with today. But I don't believe most of the kids from this high school went on to college. I used to wonder how many went to jail.

Q: Despite the situation what subjects were you particularly interested in?

COHEN: I liked history and current events, foreign languages and also world literature.

Q: Were you doing what so many people do, who end up with the State Department or other such institutions, sort of teaching yourself, doing your own reading regarding this time?

COHEN: For me those three years were kind of lost when it came to concentrated learning, although in other respects, I learned a lot. It meant a lot to me to be selected to be one of four dancers in the school musical by a black student who looked like Eartha Kitt and was talented in singing and dancing. I really liked practicing for the show, dancing with the three other girls and then being in the school play Wonderful Town. I had two costumes – one orange flapper and one black sort of cabaret. And I wore drop earrings and lots of lipstick.

I also acquired some toughness at Taft. In fact when I was on the O'Reilly Factor TV show in 2003, speaking about Iraq, the driver who picked me up told me how difficult

and adversarial O'Reilly could be and how the guests were invariably "on the floor" after the show. I took a deep breath and told myself, 'Listen, you grew up in the Bronx and got through William Howard Taft High School, you will not be messed with.' And I wasn't, I held my ground, and he invited me back on the show. So while the strictly educational part of high school was not so good, I learned other skills.

Q: What about dating and all that?

COHEN: I think my first real date was when I was 12 or 13 in junior high. It was in the afternoon because I wouldn't have been allowed out in the evening. We went to a roller skating rink and I dreamed that afterwards we would have an ice cream soda. But Lester Gerhardt, my date, bought raw green beans from the green grocer on the street. He said he loved to eat them raw, they were delicious and he offered them to me. In those days, girls were supposed to agree so I said they were swell but gagged on them. To this day, I avoid green beans, even cooked ones. In my first two years of high school I went to a prom or two at Science High but didn't date a whole lot because I was in school with a lot of kids that I had little in common with and was very young but in my senior year when I was 15-16, I had a boyfriend, Ira Gottlieb, in the group of students going to college. In fact, 50 years later in 2006, on the occasion of our 50th high school reunion, I got a funny email from a fellow student Al Hirshen who was living in Bali, Indonesia. He wrote --- 'Bobbi, I will find you Ira Gottlieb if you find me Evelyn Adler.' Well, I found him Evelyn (who he had a crush on), but he didn't find Ira for me, although I believe I heard he was a poverty lawyer.

Q: Were you much of a movie buff or TV fan?

COHEN: TV had just come in when I was in the 4th grade. We were one of the first families on the block to get a TV set and everyone wanted to watch the Milton Berle show on Tuesday night where if I remember right, people threw pies in each other's faces. So I invited my teacher, Mrs. Foote, and I remember she asked, 'Can I bring my hubby?' Well, I thought that was a dog. So I said, 'No, my mother and sister are allergic.' She told me to go home and check with my mother. I did and it was embarrassing to have to go back and tell her that she could bring her husband. It was the only time I really remember watching TV. But movies at the local Devon theatre were another matter. They were the main event on Saturday afternoon when I was a kid -- two movies, cartoons, a newsreel and a bag of popcorn or candy.

Q: A double feature.

COHEN: Yes. That is where you went with your friends. My grandmother used to give me an extra nickel to buy a soda, and we used to sit in the movies all day. It was more for the camaraderie than for the movie itself although I remember there were some movies I liked and learned from – war movies, westerns -- and it was always a packed house. In high school, I remember The Paradise movie theatre, which had a domed blue ceiling with stars painted on it – everyone's favorite place to go on a date in the Bronx.

Q: What about the outside world while you were in high school? Did the Cold War and politics intrude at all?

COHEN: In high school, I remember fearful discussions about atomic mutants and the danger of nuclear weapons. Even in junior high, it was a big issue. In fact, I remember an exam on this. The social studies teacher asked the class to identify and explain the significance of 'yucca flats.' Well, I didn't know that the atomic bomb was tested there so I wrote that they were a pair of Korean shoes. The reason they were significant, I said, was that Koreans wearing yucca flats could run faster than American soldiers in the Korean War and the U.S. army was now switching from boots to yucca flats. The teacher made me stand up and read out my answer to the class. And she flunked me and the whole class because they didn't know the answer either but I was given an extra minus 10. Well, I always remembered the atomic bomb test after that, so in answer to your question, the Cold War was taught.

Q: You graduated in '56. So you are sixteen. Your family has said college was something you better go to. How did that pan out?

COHEN: Well there I was at this very public high school and decided I wanted to go to Radcliffe College, the elitist women's college of Harvard. Of course, to go to Radcliffe or similar schools, I would have had to have a lot of things I didn't have including a score at the way top of the college boards; and with my emotional block against math, I managed to do badly on the math part. But I was quite willful. I had one of the highest averages in high school although the assistant principal (if I remember right) warned me in so many words, "You are not going to get into that school, and you are not going to get into schools like that. Don't even apply," because she said, "they don't take many people of your background (meaning Jewish and with the name Cohen), they don't take many from the Bronx, and they will probably not take students from this high school. There are quotas." I nonetheless applied and was rejected. But I got some enjoyment from this in 2005, when Radcliffe College invited me to be the first speaker in their Voices of Public Intellectual Lecture Series. So when I began my lecture, I told the audience that they've probably heard many speakers tell them how happy they were to be at Radcliffe but I really meant it, because when I was a student I had applied to Radcliffe and had been rejected. They were called "Radcliffe rejects" in those days. It was a stunner for the audience and some of my hosts and a number in the audience came up to me afterwards to say the school made a mistake. I spent my first year at college at what was called a 'fall back' school, the University of Vermont where my cousin was going and the family thought it was good that we go away together. But I realized once there that it wasn't the school for me. I understood by then that the kind of education I got in the special classes was what I wanted. And I wanted to go to an Ivy League school and wanted a better education than I felt I was getting. So after a semester, I applied to Barnard College and to Mount Holyoke College and was accepted by both. I had done well my freshman year and decided to transfer to Barnard as a sophomore.

Q: Well there was definitely a pecking order particularly in those days, a pecking order that has gotten much more blurred. Vermont would not be in the same league as

Barnard. How did you find the University of Vermont when there? In a way you were taking courses that were probably not duplicated at the high school level, so how could you not learn something?

COHEN: I wasn't challenged. I didn't find many of the professors or any of the classes really stimulating. I didn't find the students stimulating. There were sororities, frat houses and football games. I felt I was in the wrong place. There was one English professor whom I liked very much, Professor Jack Brownfield who used to have an advanced poetry seminar on Tuesday evenings at his home. Freshmen weren't allowed in but I managed to become part of it and for the first time read Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry, which I loved. And there was a very nice French Professor Doane who my cousin and I brought to a Seder in the Bronx. But I knew that despite some good experiences I was going to have to transfer. I wanted an intellectual atmosphere. I had rejected that world earlier on; then it rejected me; now I wanted to make my way back.

Q: Well Barnard of course one associates with Columbia. It shares classes. I mean you were at Barnard from when to when?

COHEN: From 1957 through 1960, my sophomore through senior year.

Q: How did you find Barnard?

COHEN: Challenging. I had really not been studying intensely since the 9th grade. At Vermont they skipped me out of English composition, whereas at Barnard they put me back into it. Professors came down hard on my writing, the logic of my thoughts, how I articulated my ideas. They got me thinking, and working hard and I remember them well – the historian Rene Albrecht-Carrie, who wanted me to become a history professor and even promoted me for a teaching assistantship at Smith, the government instructor Joseph Roberts and a wonderful German literature professor whose name escapes me, Ursula something or other -- I can see her clearly in my mind's eye. I started as an English major but I loved history and philosophy and government, so I moved into those areas.

Q: Well how would you describe the student body at Barnard?

COHEN: Very smart, very talented, achievement oriented, competitive, exceptional students. They had done well in high school, wrote well, thought well and spoke well. I made some very good friends with whom I am still close today. One is Sheila Nevins, now President of HBO documentaries who has broken all glass ceilings in her profession. Another was Norma Klein, a novelist who became a well-known writer of books for teenagers but committed suicide when she was 50 and still another, Berl Hartman, Vice President of a computer company and today a well known E2 environmental activist. While in college, I joined the debating team and went on inter-collegiate tournaments in different cities, which I enjoyed a lot. We debated nuclear weapons and labor unions, and I was asked to be president but it was just too much work. If there was a downside at college, it was the uncertainties surrounding the woman's role vs. career. A number of the girls viewed education as a means to marriage and flashing diamond rings was big

time. Others wanted their own careers but there were tensions and uncertainties. I felt them deeply.

Q: Were you living at home?

COHEN: Initially I lived at home because the dorms were reserved for out-of-towners and I was not old enough to live off campus (you had to be 20 and I graduated when I was 20). But I found a way to move into apartments rented by other students so for a good part of the time, I lived off campus.

Q: So, what about movements on campus? It was later of course that Columbia, and I suppose Barnard by inference, got very much involved in the 60's movement. But were movements going on, political movements within Barnard-Columbia when you were there?

COHEN: Not really. The great political ferment took place in the late 1960s and I was in school in the late 1950s. When I was there, the influence of the McCarthy period was pervasive. Although there was faculty at Columbia who loudly denounced the 'McCarthyites,' there was also a lot of fear. I remember a history professor telling us that he had been denounced in the subway for reading Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto, which he was teaching in class. And lectures or essays about the Soviet Union always seemed to have to end with expected denunciations of communism. Mr. Roberts, a government professor, objected to the negative impact that McCarthyism was having on the non-communist left in the U.S. Socialists were decimated, he felt, and he used to bring into class the platforms of the political left in Britain and the European continent to share with us and discuss. He was asked to leave the school, possibly also because of an unorthodox style of teaching. In protest, I switched out of the government department into the history department. He certainly influenced my way of thinking. The lecture I gave in class, I remember, analyzed the labor party platform in England after the war, which he had made me think about. He also made us aware of young British writers who were questioning their societies. They were called the...

Q: The angry young men?

COHEN: Yes, Mr. Roberts brought some of their writings into class. When I took a trip to Europe the summer of my junior year, I was well prepared for political discussions. In France, I remember talking to socialist and communist workers in cafes and also students at the university. So my whole political world began to enlarge. This process continued in graduate school when I spent a year in Italy as part of the M.A. program of SAIS [the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies]. I believe I learned more about political ideology that year in Italy than in any year at school in the States, because there were so many different political persuasions -- right wing socialists, left wing socialists, communists, Christian Democrats, conservatives, liberals -- every manner of opinion. The broad scope of political opinion struck me as vibrant whereas our political parties – democrat and republican – seemed so bland and restricted by comparison.

Q: Well before you go to this, I would like to go back to the Barnard experience. You seem to be describing the Eisenhower years, not much dissent, pretty much almost politically stifling, or pretty close to it. The university wasn't very much bubbling or fermenting, was it?

COHEN: Not that I was aware of. There were some students drawn to the civil rights movement, but overall, as you point out, it was a pretty staid period. I also think the teaching of government at Barnard was limited by mainly ignoring what happened after the Second World War. I always wondered what happened after 1945 since the focus was largely historical and on providing a sound theoretical foundation. It was Mr. Roberts who insisted that we read the newspapers and talk about what was going on *now*. He once stormed out of class because no one was prepared to talk about current events. The teaching of international relations also paid little attention to the human dimension or what we call human rights or human security today. No one, for example, taught anything about the Holocaust when discussing the Second World War. The subject of genocide, it was felt, did not really belong within the *realpolitik* framework; it was an ethical issue and there was little receptivity then to what one professor dubbed "morality in foreign policy." Thus, the significance of deliberate mass murder, how it happened, its implications and what it meant for our whole contemporary society, was not considered a legitimate subject meriting exploration or discussion.

Q: How about Israel? How did it play in there?

COHEN: It didn't in my classes. The main thrust of the study of international relations was theoretical and not focused on current events. When the Middle East did come into it, the professor I had for international relations noted that there were more Arab countries than Israel, that they were oil rich and although she never said so explicitly, thought the U.S. should have a different policy toward that part of the world. She objected to any place in foreign policy for what she called moral or ethical concerns.

Q: Well this is very much the Kissinger thinking, focused on American interests rather than America's role or values. What you are describing is interesting because I have interviewed a couple of people who came out of Columbia during the late 30's and at that time things were really moving. You had the socialists, the Forward paper, the socialist movement, the communist movement – a very strong sort of Jewish European socialist movement going on and a lot of ferment. Later some of them got into difficulty because they moved too far to the left. But it was a very exciting place. But for you I think it had passed.

COHEN: Yes, this was the time of nuclear tests, the Cold War, fear of the Soviet Union. In terms of social ferment the 50s were a subdued time. The only politically exciting class I had was the one with Mr. Roberts. I remember writing to him -- after he left -- about government service as a way of promoting change and he replied that in those times, it would probably be depressing for someone who cares. He also told me not to look for support for democracy in America from the well-educated alone or to trust reform led by intellectuals. I kept his letter; he added: "I was very moved with your statement that

you've managed to keep your hopes and values positive in the midst of the attack on them college has represented. That's about the most encouraging thing I've heard from one of my generation in some time."

Q: So then you graduated in 1960. Then what? In the first place did you have a goal at that point? For women, often the goal is marriage, the Mrs. Degree. How did this play with you?

COHEN: It didn't. I didn't want to get married. I mean I thought I did and said I did but I learned in time that I really didn't. I remember Clare Boothe Luce's play, "The Women", and a novel by Mary McCarthy, "The Group," which bothered me because all the women seemed to want was an engagement ring (I never wore or wanted one) and to learn how to keep their husbands from predatory other women. It didn't resonate with me at all. I knew I needed to find myself. I wanted a profession and didn't want to live in the suburbs with a husband and children and a man who defined my life. At that time, most men expected women to stay at home.

Q: Of course!

COHEN: So the men I met who wanted to get married to me, I didn't want to tie myself down with. I was beginning to feel the stirrings of what became the Ms. and women's movement but I wasn't really sure how to articulate it. I think I was afraid to. I thought something was amiss with me and maybe there was. At my graduation from Barnard, the college president [Millicent Macintosh] told the class that women can have both careers and marriage but that women do have to stay home and that "the normal woman will adjust herself without resentment." My friends at Barnard, the ones I was close to felt some of these dilemmas. What I knew was that I wanted to get a Master's degree in international relations and get some practical experience, which is why I applied to SAIS in Washington. There, many of the professors had experience working in government. They were not just academics. They had a policy orientation and that interested me.

Q: I want to talk about that in a minute, but were you getting pressure from your family to find a nice Jewish doctor?

COHEN: Of course.

Q: I asked that question and I think I knew the answer.

COHEN: Two of my cousins married Jewish doctors. What I brought home was a nice Italian left wing journalist. He was on a Fulbright to the States and studying at my graduate school. My parents to their credit restrained themselves, although my grandmother was quite enthusiastic about him.

Q: And your sister –

She didn't meet him. She was no longer at home, had married at a young age and her husband went to work for my father. She had children and did not work outside the home. I remember my mother telling both of us how a wife keeps up the house – Monday for vacuuming and the drapes, Tuesday for laundry, and so forth. The idea of being in charge of laundry after writing all those papers at Barnard and being on the debating team was enough to send me packing. Meanwhile, my mother's sister urged me to marry just about any medical or dental student who asked me out, whether or not I liked him. "A bad marriage is better than no marriage," she would say. I actually nearly married a Jewish doctor some four years after college, but pulled out at the last minute.

Q: What about your experience studying political science? I was a history major and I always thought that political science, particularly in later years got very theoretical and almost of no particular pertinence to life outside of drawing up charts and all. How did you find political science and international relations?

COHEN: Well at Barnard, it was called government and it was a major. And there was a lot of theory but I don't remember charts. What I overall received was a foundation for understanding the 'isms' and current events but the discussion and application of what was going on in the world were mostly left to a later time. What was useful was that I learned to express myself in writing, speaking and to read fast and get the essence of something quickly just by scanning the text. These tools stood by me in my professional life. In fact in 2005, Barnard College awarded me its Distinguished Alumna Award, and I thanked the college for teaching me how to speed read, write and think. But exciting new ideas about what was going on in the world weren't in the government classes I took.

Q: How did SAIS come across your radar?

COHEN: Well the Columbia School of International Affairs, where I applied and was accepted, was too theoretical for me, so I began to look at other schools, talk to people, and heard about SAIS. It was a small school in those days in an old town house on Florida Avenue in Washington DC. Although it didn't look much like a school, the bios of some of the professors interested me because they worked in government. And it struck me as the kind of place where I would learn about what was going on in the world and maybe find my place in it.

Q: So you were at SAIS from when to when?

COHEN: I arrived there in the fall of 1960 and remained until the summer of '61 when I went to Bologna for my second year.

Q: Let's talk about the fall of '60. Did you get involved in one of the impressive political campaigns between Kennedy and Nixon? A lot of energy went into that campaign. In fact, I can't think of any other campaign than the one going on now between Obama and *McCain that seems to engage the same energy. How did it hit you?*

COHEN: Well, I missed voting in that election because I wasn't old enough. I was 20 when I started grad school. Had I voted, it would have been for Kennedy but I must say that I didn't much like how Kennedy became president.

Q: His father's involvement and the money that was used?

COHEN: Yes, so he was not a hero to me. I also didn't look at him and swoon. My mother did. He campaigned in the Bronx, and when he was standing on the street, she was looking out her apartment window and at one moment their eyes met and they got into a waving thing and smiled at each other, and she never stopped talking about it. Making his brother attorney general didn't sit well with me either although I later developed admiration for RFK. But mainly I was opposed to the Vietnam War and thought he made a terrible mistake in engaging the U.S. there. I was sure it would become a disaster, and I was also appalled by the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Q: There were people who really fell in love with Kennedy. I didn't, I felt that Johnson aside from uncorking the Vietnam War was far more effective and positive a president than Kennedy. But anyway, what was SAIS like when you arrived at the townhouse on Florida Avenue?

COHEN: Well it wasn't a typical school. It had a living room and many small rooms used as classrooms. The library occupied a few rooms, hardly the well-established huge Butler Library I was used to at Columbia. I have to confess I felt a little uncomfortable at first because there were so few women at the school, maybe five out of more than 100 students in the entering class. After all, I came from a women's college, and suddenly it seemed as if I were in a men's school. Some of them would run over and ask for a date, which was awkward too.

Q: You didn't feel you were part of a mating pool?

COHEN: No I didn't. I was really turned off when male students asked if I were looking for an MRS. degree, a favorite line in those days. But I liked the classes a lot. In the basic courses there were 50 to 60 students but in the more specialized classes – I took Soviet studies -- there were sometimes only ten students, and in the Russian language class, there were only two -- myself and Mario Sica, an Italian who became a diplomat and with whom I'm still friends. There was a good deal of interaction with the professors and the other students. We had to present papers and there was lots of discussion. And it wasn't theoretical like at Barnard; it was about events going on then, which I appreciated.

Q: How did we view the Soviet Union at that time? Did you find that McCarthyism was no longer the overriding factor or not?

COHEN: At SAIS we were taught to provide objective analysis. I took Soviet economic relations with Eastern Europe, and had to look dispassionately at what the economic relations were, what drove the relationships, and the extent to which politics played an overriding role in economics. I was not expected to denounce the Soviet system at the

end of the paper. Helmut Sonnenfeldt, who was in the National Security Council (NSC) at the time dealing with the Soviet Union, was one of my professors, and he demanded hard non-biased analysis.

Q: Hal Sonnenfeldt? I have interviewed him.

COHEN: I'm sure. In class, Sonnenfeldt put us on our toes because he would call on students rather than wait for them to raise their hands. 'Cohen,' he would say, 'what does this latest Soviet statement mean?' At first, he was harder on me than other students because I didn't take the first half of his class. He gave a year class on the Soviet Union, but because I had a full program the first semester with other courses, I wanted to enter his class in the second semester. So I went to him and told him that I studied the Soviet Union in college, had read a lot of the material and felt I could join the second part of his class without taking the first. He said, "No you have to take the first part to take the second part," and I said, "No, I really think I can manage in the second part." So after going around like this for a while, he finally said, "All right, take the class but you will have to give the first lecture, and your subject will be the organization of Soviet foreign policy." He thought I would back off but I said, 'OK,' even though I knew nothing about the organization of Soviet foreign policy and he knew I knew nothing; in fact nobody did. There was little written on it and the Soviet system was hardly what you would call transparent. So I spent the inter semester period frantically looking up what information there was. After that first 'lecture' of mine, he called on me a lot in class to show me, I believe, that I didn't know everything he taught before, but I tried to study up before class and I managed to swim, not drown, got an A-, and all told it was a terrific learning experience. He really got me thinking and analyzing and speaking up on events of the day, on events that came onto his desk at the NSC, so it was quite different from college, a different experience altogether. Today, Hal Sonnenfeldt is a colleague at the Brookings Institution and I told him this story.

Q: Now did the Foreign Service or American diplomacy cross your horizon much?

COHEN: I studied American diplomatic history but I didn't much like the recent foreign policy of the United States, especially toward Vietnam, Latin America etc., so representing it in the Foreign Service was not an objective of mine. The students at the school who wanted to join the Foreign Service seemed sort of straitlaced even regimented to me, sort of 'yes' people. Of course this is a stereotype, but that's what I thought at the time, and for me, it was important to say what I thought, based on my values, not on the government's interests. I didn't want to be told what the line was and how to see the situation so I never thought I would fit into the State Department. Moreover, in the Foreign Service a woman would have to leave if she got married -- to say it wasn't woman friendly would be an understatement.

Q: Well looking at a career in international relations, what were your possibilities?

COHEN: The options for women were limited in the early 1960s. Most places didn't want to hire women because they would get married, have children, and leave their

positions so it was felt there was little point in hiring and training them. Secretarial jobs were plentiful and women could become high school teachers which I wasn't interested in doing either. Of the SAIS women graduates, one went on to work for a bank, which wasn't for me. Another went on to work for the United Nations as a civil servant in finance and administration but being part of a bureaucracy did not interest me. I wanted to do independent research and writing, and the SAIS and Barnard placement offices couldn't help me.

So I turned to the Manhattan phone book, looked under "international," and called every place listed until I got down to IR and the International Review Service. It was a publication in the UN press section, and it was looking for somebody to do writing and research on international subjects, and they hired me. It was my first job after graduating from SAIS.

Q: Let's go back to SAIS. There are two themes here that are sort of you specific, the role of women and anti-Semitism. How about anti- Semitism? Did you feel that this was still around or was it a dying thing?

COHEN: There was no overt anti-Semitism but I felt a kind of wall at times between me and other students. Let me give you a few examples in my social life. After having two dates with a SAIS student, he told me he couldn't ask me out anymore because I was Jewish, and he would never be able to marry me. Even though the mention of marriage was incongruous to our casual dates, he felt he had to tell me he could never become serious with me. Another student invited me to a party at his parents' home, and his mother took me aside and said to me, "I understand you are Jewish. Well let me tell you that that is all right with me." So my being Jewish was something that had to be contended with. I was different and it was a problem for others when socially mixing with me. I also remember an African American at SAIS inviting me to go out with him and some friends visiting from New York. He invited me, I realized, because the two friends were Jewish and from Brooklyn. He assumed I would have lots in common with them but I had very little in common with them. What was interesting for me was that in New York I never thought of myself as Jewish because I was surrounded by Jews. But in Washington DC I was in a minority and was constantly reminded of my identity. Even my roommate who was Jewish made me aware of my identity because she rejected her Jewish roots, immersed herself in Arab culture and married an Arab.

Q: How did the Holocaust and Israel come up at SAIS? This was something you say you really didn't get into at Barnard.

COHEN: I didn't take courses on the Middle East at SAIS so I don't know. But in the classes I did take, *realpolitik* prevailed; there was no focus on 'ethical' issues. However, at my second year at SAIS the issue of the Holocaust came up a lot although it was not studied *per se* in class. In Bologna, there were lots of German and Austrian students at the school and we all studied contemporary Germany together. I had never met a German before but as soon as I arrived with the name Cohen, just about every German student at the school began offering to drive me to school, or take me here or there and many told

me stories about how they went to Israel and studied Hebrew or had studied Yiddish. Well I did not want to be the repository of all their guilt and also did not want to absolve them of feeling responsible, even though I knew and they knew that it was their parents' and grandparents' generations that were at fault, not theirs. So I had to develop a relationship with the German students on a better foundation and work out my own feelings as well. I did not want to represent 'the Jew' writ large for them. First and foremost I was a human being, a concept they didn't really seem to fully grasp; secondarily I was an American. And third I was Jewish. They had to come to grips with what had happened in their country and how they got there. They were quite haunted. One of these students even passed through Washington decades later and told me he wanted me to know something – even though his grandfather was a Nazi, he loved him.

Q: What about Bologna? Bologna is of course in the Red belt of Italy which was very reddish in those days. You spent your second year at SAIS' Bologna Center. That was 1961-1962. It was quite an awakening for you.

COHEN: Tremendous.

Q: How did you find Bologna and Italy at that time?

COHEN: Lively. It was the most exciting and interesting year of my school life. The whole question of government came alive. Suddenly I was in a city that was run by Communists, and in which there were also many Socialists. Of course West European socialists and communists were quite different from Soviet or East European communists. And there were many tensions between the two, especially after the 1956 Soviet repression of the Hungarians. And there were the Social Democrats which had split from the mainline Socialists, the Christian Democrats and some right of center parties. It was an extraordinarily vibrant political scene in Italy, a big transformation since the decades of fascism. The Italians were coming alive politically and economically and all the students in Bologna who came not only from Italy but from the different West European countries enjoyed talking about politics. Either they belonged to a party or supported a party and had definite often partisan political views. Their active discussion of political issues contrasted with American students in the 50s and early 60s who were mostly silent.

Q: The silent generation.

COHEN: So this to me was exciting, a real eye opener. I took courses on contemporary Germany, contemporary Italy, and contemporary France. They were not theoretical but about current events (spanning the '30s through the present), and coming to terms with what happened in Europe under the Nazis and Fascists. It was also the beginning of European unity, the time of the Berlin Wall and the cutting off of the East from the West. So a great deal was going on politically and I felt I was right in the middle of it.

Q: Well on the communist side the thing that has always puzzled me or at least really disturbed me was that here are people in Europe getting quite vivid accounts of the

dismal life in the Soviet Union and yet they were still talking about communism in ideological terms. It didn't parse very well.

COHEN: I believe a good part of this came from the experience of World War II when after the end of the Soviet-German pact, the communists in the different West European countries fought against fascism. For a lot of the left, the communists still had that glow despite what was going on in the Soviet Union. In fact, some didn't want to fully acknowledge that a Cold War had developed and that the situation in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union were as you say not only dismal but quite antithetical to everything the West stood for. Some of the European left wanted to be a neutral force, to stand between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. And still others reacted to the sweeping anti-communist denunciation of everything on the left, whether communist or socialist. As I mentioned when I was in college you couldn't look at events dispassionately without being considered suspect. I found, at least in the studies I did at SAIS in Washington and in Bologna, that they didn't come with the same ideological baggage I experienced in the McCarthy period. The left in Europe was a legitimate political force and it had some good social programs, as contrasted with what was happening in the Soviet Union. The Italian socialists, moreover, accepted the democratic framework, although it was something else with the Italian communists, although they also began to develop a distinct West European identity.

Q: Well how did you find the SAIS presentation of East and West?

COHEN: The big issue at the Bologna Center was forging West European unity which of itself was an agenda against the East. Professors known for their support of West European unity and Franco-German reconciliation like Alfred Grosser were on the faculty as was Federico Mancini, a known Italian anti-Fascist and strong democracy proponent. One of the high points of the school year was a trip to the headquarters of the different West European offices forging West European unity. But reconciling Europe was not always easy to achieve. Look at what happened at the end of the school year when we all were expected to be imbued with Western unity. Anecdotal to be sure but it said something. There was a soccer game in which the Germans and Austrians constituted one team and all the other European students the other team. Dividing the student players like that was because of the numbers, but politically it was disastrous. About two weeks before the game, the German and Austrian students began to get up early in the morning to practice. Since we all lived in the same building, we could hear them assembling at 6 or 7 in the morning, and it soon became apparent that they were aiming to win, not just play in some fun school event. Not surprisingly when the game took place, the Germans and Austrians led by many points, and suddenly other European students, who weren't even on the team, began to jump into the game to try to defeat the German team. Even professors jumped in. When a French professor jumped in, a German professor followed to counter him. The whole idea of European unity came crashing down. When the Germans held a victory party after the game, just about no one went; I didn't.

Such tensions were also apparent during the year. I remember being invited as part of a group of students to the home of a German student in Munich. There was a festival in Landshut commemorating the marriage of a Polish princess to a Bavarian prince in the Middle Ages. A number of the Italian students refused to go and told me it would be a disgrace to my people if I went. But I did go because I thought it was important to promote unity and reconciliation which the school stood for. But I must say I was very uncomfortable in Germany. The parents of the student who hosted us and paid special attention to me may well have been Nazi sympathizers for all I knew. I remember the father wanted to show me some photographs of the festival when it was really a great event, he said, not like today, but on the wall in the photo was a swastika which caught both of our eyes at the same time. He then quickly closed the book and said something about moving on from the past.

Q: Well these things run deep. I know we have an intern right now who is from Germany, and I always introduce her to people as from Munich but she is actually from Dachau. She went to Dachau High School. She said they get quite a dose of the Holocaust being from there because of the history of the place. It runs very deep. Returning to the political environment in Bologna, I was at our embassy in Belgrade while you were in Bologna. We would go to Vincenza to the PX and would drive into Italy and see these big banners across the street Voto Communista -- we would look at each other and say "Oh my God." Did you find an intellectual thrust toward Marxism? It was still you know very popular on campuses. It appeals to the young and professors like it too.

COHEN: Well before I get to Marxism on the campus, let me tell you about what I would call fascism on the campus. At the school were a group of American students who made jokes about the Italians and looked down on them. Notable among them was the American representative on the student council. Well, a few of us decided to challenge such representation and his supporters. We canvassed the American students, got a meeting together and ousted the head representative. I was asked to provide the rationale at the meeting and I spoke of the unacceptability of discrimination and what America and the new Europe were supposed to stand for. A number of years later when I was back in New York, one of the group of American students behind the ousted leader called me and said he wanted to see me and came over to visit. He told me he now lived in Germany, had joined the Neo Fascist party and wanted to explain that. I told him it would take him five seconds to get to the door and I would give him one.

Overall, however, ideological panaceas were not in vogue in Bologna when I was there because of the experience of Fascism and Nazism. And the Berlin Wall went up which didn't exactly attract students to communism. However, there was a strong political left in Italy and some of the Italian students were socialist. However, the Socialist and Communist parties had split and the Socialists had also split, undermining the power of the left, but the Communist party was the ruling party in Bologna. To me, the non-communist left and even the communist left did not seem so ideological, but rather a group espousing economic and social programs -- better wages and working conditions for workers, better health care for working families and so forth. And they did do some of these things – it was not just propaganda. And they benefited politically from having

been part of the anti-fascist resistance. Yet the relationship of the Italian communists to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was of course disturbing. However, the political coalition of Christian Democrats, Socialists and other parties plus the economic boom in the country began to weaken the hold of the communist left.

Q: Of course in Italy if your family was communist, you were communist. I mean one's political bent was almost tribal.

COHEN: Not entirely. My Italian boyfriend or 'fidanzata' who I met at SAIS in the U.S. came from a family quite split politically. He himself was a Nenni socialist but his father had been a fascist in charge of the educational system in Trieste and other parts of Yugoslavia. And if I remember right, one of his uncles had been strung up in Rome because of his fascist background. When I met his mother, she was a Christian Democrat as was one of his brothers, but his youngest brother, a university student, was a communist. The politics of the family was fascinating and all of the immediate family embraced me wholeheartedly, although I had the impression that the mother at times would have liked me to convert to Catholicism (she would call me to the television to hear the Pope) while family members in Rome, whom I never met, expressed concern at the prospect of a Jewish woman becoming part of their family.

Q: What was your goal at SAIS in Bologna?

COHEN: Clearly, one was to see Franco Soglian, who worked in Milan. The other was to get my Masters and decide what I wanted to do as a career. I loved research and learning about different political situations. I loved foreign policy, foreign countries, and I decided that I wanted to do research and writing in international affairs. When I returned to the States in 1962, job choices for women were limited as I described. I applied to a number of publications, including the *New York Times*, but most doors were closed to women as researchers and writers. I got one break with a left wing publication, *Monthly Review*, which at least considered me. It was a socialist publication. When I was interviewed, however, the editor said to me, "You know we have a job and we would give it to you. I mean you are qualified and I would hire you. But I am not going to because this will be your first job and if you take this job, the U.S. government will never hire you and many other places will never hire you, and you will be marked professionally for life." "So," he said, "if you are really interested in working here, come back in a year or two, but I will not hire you now." That was the smartest thing I was ever told.

Q: Oh absolutely.

COHEN: My views in fact did change and I am grateful to that editor, someone well known at the time. I also had a number of interviews with the Hudson Institute which had just been founded but they were too far on the ideological right for me. That's when I went to the New York telephone directory and found the International Review Service (IRS), a publication in the United Nations that was looking for someone to do research and writing. I worked there from the fall of 1962 until the fall of 1963.

Q: Let's talk about the International Review Service. What were you doing?

COHEN: I was doing research for reports on UN related questions, like the "Congo and the United Nations." That was the first one I worked on. I prepared an extensive chronology, putting the information together so that it would tell a story. A more senior staff member then wrote up an analysis based on the chronology. Later I began to contribute to the analysis. I shouldn't forget to mention that initially I also had to take down and type letters because that is what women did in those days.

Q: Of course.

COHEN: Then I worked on the publication, "Cuba and the United States," which was difficult to frame given all the political controversies surrounding this issue.

Q: Was this part of the United Nations?

COHEN: It was located in the UN building but it was an independent publication in the press section, in the same way that *Time magazine* or *Agence France Presse* had offices in the press section.

Q: Did the publication have a point of view or what was behind it?

COHEN: The editor had a liberal left outlook. He had been active with unions, civil rights and aiding the Spanish Republic. The publication was funded by Nationwide Insurance in the Midwest, which had a liberal bent. The publication's lawyer was Eleanor Jackson Piel, a well-known civil liberties attorney and a former deputy attorney general of California. I remember that the office bought its pencils from Alger Hiss who I spoke with directly to place orders. That was more an anti-McCarthy than a pro Hiss gesture on the part of IRS [much later he was found to be guilty]. As a staff member, we were instructed to be as objective as possible in collecting information and making analyses. Otherwise, we were told, the publication would not succeed.

Q: How did you find working at the United Nations in that era?

COHEN: Well, being in the press section was different from working in the United Nations Secretariat. I was not part of the bureaucracy. I was part of the independent press hired to follow what the UN was doing. I was with all the foreign correspondents watching what the UN did, monitoring how the Cuban missile crisis played out at the UN. The Indian and Italian correspondents I got to know were really interesting since their viewpoints were different from the American correspondents and I felt broadened by their take on events. I was fresh out of grad school and was sent to sit in on the Security Council to listen to Adlai Stevenson.

Q: Saying, "I will sit here until hell freezes over."

COHEN: Yes, and then come back and write notes and keep it for publications we would be preparing. I remember meeting Stevenson. I was at a reception and looked around and there he was. My mouth must have dropped because he said, "Yes I am." He was extremely cordial and talked to me for awhile, and then the Russian Ambassador Nikolai Fedorenko came over, and he said, "Let me introduce you to the Russian ambassador," Well I figured they had better things to talk about than hear my views on the Cuban crisis, so after a moment or so I excused myself. For me, being right out of school and on the scene with press passes to all of the meetings others were dying to get into, with invitations to receptions, getting to know the foreign correspondents and securing all the latest documents right away -- it was a tremendous year. I would have stayed there much longer had it not been for sexual harassment, which was another aspect of women's employment in those days.

Q: Do you want to talk about that?

COHEN: Yes it's important to do so. The problem was with my boss, the man in charge of the publication. He was of Czech origin, in his 60s, had a sort of European flair and did not engage in the kind of harassment you read about. He said he wanted to discuss something with me and over dinner asked if I would consider becoming his mistress; in exchange he would help advance my career. He thought I was talented and pointed out that he had helped another young woman before me, who was now launched and working in some well-known publishing house. He would introduce me to the UN Secretary-General and make sure I had entrée to many career opportunities. I just listened and knew I would never have such a relationship with him but said I would think about it. I hoped that maybe he would forget about it and find somebody else. His wife by the way worked down the street in another office. But a month or two later, he did come back to find out what my decision was. I thanked him for the offer but said I would not so engage, and he replied angrily, saying "I should have known you are a bourgeois." So I began to look for a new job. That was difficult because I loved this job, was learning so much there, enjoyed the UN press section and didn't want to leave at all.

Q: How did you feel about this? I mean did you talk to your parents, did you have friends you could talk with about this or was this something you just sort of shrugged off and said I am just not going to do this? Or did you feel outrage? I am trying to capture the times.

COHEN: Basically I think I accepted it -- this was the way it was for women. We even joked about it, calling him "the letch." After all there were no laws at the time, no one to appeal to. I realized that advancing my career through affairs with men in positions of power was not something I would do but I also realized that it was an accepted course of action for others. The woman whose career he had advanced, whom I met, and who had gone to my college had been escorted by him to important events, introduced by him to influential people and did get ahead in the publishing world. So it was definitely a route to take but not something I could do.

Q: Well I am sure that this practice is still going on, but …

COHEN: It is not essential anymore. Of course, a woman, or a man for that matter, can sexually 'use' others to move ahead. But women have lots of opportunities at getting jobs and when harassed, they can threaten legal action. What saddens me as I look back was that there was no way to challenge what happened.

Q: How old were you?

COHEN: 23.

Q: It was very difficult. One sees what women went through. I mean this was what was happening at that time, how things were. What was your impression of the operation of the United Nations and the people in it while you were there?

COHEN: There was still a lot of idealism around the United Nations in those days, but the cold war took a large toll. Most if not all the Russian and East European staff in the building were KGB personnel who had their own agendas whatever their job descriptions. During the Cuban missile crisis, it was a thicket of East-West tensions, with Third World states trying to be "neutral" but often failing because they were allied in one way or another with the East or West. At the same time, it became clear especially during the Cuban missile crisis that the real centers of power were not at the United Nations at all although the UN could play an important role.

Q: But another thing was happening at that time -- the discovery of Africa by the rest of the world, you know the Congo and other African crises. Did you get involved in that?

COHEN: The first publication I worked on, "Congo and the United Nations," brought me face to face with the de-colonization issue and the East-West competition over the newly independent African states. The UN, in particular Dag Hammarskjöld, the Secretary-General and also the United States became caught in the middle of European efforts at re-colonization and Soviet efforts to expand communism. Events in the Congo showed how outside powers could foment civil strife and instability in new states. As more and more African and Asian states entered the UN, they were actively courted by the major powers. They also added their own new and diverse opinions at the UN, which made it a richer and more interesting place, sometimes more difficult.

Q: Let's go to your next positions.

COHEN: I was offered a research and writing position at Deadline Data on World Affairs, run by a former Foreign Service officer John Black. I wrote up political news in different countries in a chronology with selected comments from the world press. Vietnam was one of the countries I was assigned and I remember my write up and selection of quotes raised the hackles of the co-editor who favored quotes in support of U.S. involvement in the war. But my text was allowed to stand. It pointed out how the U.S. engaged the North Vietnamese first which in turn led to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Johnson's justification for an expanded war. From my reading of events at that time, I

became quite anti the Vietnam War. And I met Bella Abzug at that time because she was leading women against the war. The job itself, however, became rather routine -- the only 9 to 5 job I ever had, so in 1965 I went back to the Manhattan telephone book.

Q: Good old Bell Telephone.

COHEN: This time I looked at the listings under 'world.' I called every entry and got to one called the World Jewish Congress. They were looking for someone to represent them at the United Nations in the human rights field. I was interviewed, and got the job. I worked for WJC about six years. It was at that organization that my career became launched in human rights.

Q: Well let's talk about this. In the first place you are in New York. Did you find yourself in a social circle of bright young international thinkers or not?

COHEN: I was in a social circle of bright young professionals but none of the ones I knew were focused on international affairs. Most of the women were in publishing or teaching, some in the new field of computers, or writers and most of the men were lawyers, doctors or scientists. But at the World Jewish Congress, I met a wonderful group of intellectuals who had fled Europe during the Holocaust and were immersed in international affairs. They were a good deal older than I was but I became good friends and colleagues with many and learned from their work – they were historians, journalists, poets, scholars, and came from Moscow, Warsaw, Vienna, London, Paris, Buenos Aires. My immediate bosses were Dr. Maurice Perlzweig, Monty Jacobs, and Dr. Natan Lerner. And at the American Jewish Congress was the magazine *Congress Bi-Weekly* which sold on the newsstands and began publishing things I wrote.

Q: Did you feel there was a good solid path towards getting executive responsibility in what you were doing and then moving on?

COHEN: I didn't think in those terms. I wanted to do something I cared about, that I considered important, I wanted to write about events, and hopefully help make a difference in people's lives. At the WJC, I was sent to the UN to follow the development of international human rights standards. I found that important. It was the first time the international community was developing standards on civil and political rights, economic and social rights, racial discrimination and other issues. I went to UN meetings, listened to delegates from all parts of the world, talked to them and also to international lawyers and NGOs and began writing reports and articles about the meaning of the standards and the politics behind their development. I liked being published, to be read and get my ideas across. I also became active in the non-governmental community at the UN. There were many NGOs affiliated to the UN, and I became the secretary of the NGO human rights committee and then was elected co-chair of the committee. I became a known advocate for human rights issues at the UN.

Q: OK, let's talk about human rights; we are talking about mid-1960s. What was the human rights focus at that time? I recall Eleanor Roosevelt wrote the human rights declaration.

COHEN: Eleanor Roosevelt played a big role in the drafting and adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. So did Rene Cassin of France and Charles Malik of Lebanon; there was also an active Chinese delegate (who was a democracy proponent). It was a tremendous achievement, establishing that individuals had rights and were subjects of international law, not just states. Surprising as it sounds, when Hitler and Stalin murdered on a mass scale, they weren't actually violating any international human rights agreement. Once the Declaration was adopted, that changed, and efforts then turned to spelling out what exactly the rights in the Declaration meant and making them legally binding. In the 1960s, treaties began to be drafted on civil and political rights; economic, social and cultural rights; racial discrimination; torture; and so forth. There was a great burst of political energy around the development of international standards.

Then, the tougher question began to be asked -- 'How can we apply these standards and hold states accountable?' I became particularly involved in this issue while representing a French organization at the U.N. I was still at the WJC, but on a voluntary basis became UN representative of the Federation Internationale des Droits de l'Homme – the International Federation for Human Rights. Based in Paris, the organization was headed by Daniel Mayer, the former Socialist minister in Leon Blum's government and Cassin was also connected to it. It was in this capacity that I had my first *direct* run-in at the United Nations on human rights. In 1969, the Soviet Union proposed that the International Federation and other human rights groups at the UN as well as most Jewish organizations be expelled or downgraded in their consultative status. The Soviets argued that the NGOs were slandering member states by criticizing their human rights records. At that time at the UN, it was acceptable only to publicly discuss two human rights situations – apartheid in southern Africa and the Israel-occupied territories in the Middle East. When NGOs tried to broaden that base, the Soviet Union and other states resisted, arguing this would violate state sovereignty and the Charter. Although the review of the NGOs at first focused on what NGOs were doing to oppose apartheid, it quickly turned into an effort to restrict NGOs from speaking out more broadly on human rights. I had to defend the International Federation and was questioned for some two hours, which was quite tense. The Soviet delegate sat cattycornered from me and banged his fist on the table, shouting that the International Federation was slandering UN member states and should be expelled (the Federation had criticized the Soviet Union's treatment of dissidents). I was told by Curtis Roosevelt of the Secretariat that I stayed "cool as a cucumber" when I argued that the organization was seeking to implement the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the subsequent human rights treaties adopted and that this was the responsibility of NGOs at the UN. The hearing was before a committee of twelve states, with the final decision made by the UN Economic and Social Council. I managed to get 7 votes to 3 with 2 abstentions in the committee, the 7 coming from the West, Latin America and Africa, the 3 negative votes from the Soviet Union, Bulgaria and Libya and the 2 abstentions from Asia. The Soviet effort to expel or downgrade

organizations failed, but NGOs faced difficult times in UN human rights meetings for at least a decade thereafter.

Looking back, I realize that it was in this heated hearing that I basically found a career for myself, advocating for the implementation of human rights standards around the world and for reforms at the UN. Two years later in 1971, I was invited to become executive director of the International League for Human Rights, an organization founded by Roger Baldwin, the founder of the American Civil Liberties Union. The Chair of the organization was John Carey, an international lawyer at Coudert Brothers who was US expert representative on the UN Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities.

Q: Let's go back to the World Jewish Congress. Was this, I am not sure this is the right term, a Zionist organization because when you talk about human rights, Israel has a problem. How did Zionism and human rights fit together at that time?

COHEN: The World Jewish Congress was different from the World Zionist Organization. It was an international federation of Jewish communities and organizations around the world. It was founded in 1936 as Nazism was rising. The President was Nahum Goldman, a Polish Jew who understood that not all Jews wanted to go to Israel, that Jews should be protected in whatever countries they resided, and that one way to achieve this was by uniting Jewish communities throughout the world. The WJC was an umbrella group for these communities and acted as a diplomatic arm of the Jewish people. Goldman himself held multiple passports and although he could have become President of Israel, he chose instead to represent the world's Jewish communities. It was the WJC after the Second World War that negotiated the reparations agreements between Germany and the Jewish people and it was also the WJC that was instrumental in bettering relationships between the Vatican and the Jewish people. The WJC was certainly supportive of the state of Israel but that was not its purpose – it maintained offices or had affiliates in countries in which there were large Jewish communities – France, Canada, the US, the UK, Argentina, Brazil, Romania, and others, although in the Soviet Union which had a very large Jewish community there could be no office. One of the responsibilities I had, in addition to following human rights at the UN was to update a book on *The Jewish Communities of the World*, which identified communities in more than 50 countries. At WJC international meetings, representatives of Jewish communities discussed and hammered out common views on a range of issues. I was present at the 1966 meeting in Brussels where I served as a rapporteur.

Q: What about the Six Day War and the occupation of the West Bank?

COHEN: Personally, I was deeply concerned about Israel during the Six Day War and rejoiced when it won that war. But my particular job at the WJC did not concern Israel or the war. I was hired to focus on the development of international human rights standards in which Jews and Jewish communities had a strong interest. More senior WJC representatives -- I was in my 20s -- dealt with WJC policies toward the state of Israel and the ensuing occupation, how it was being carried out and the extent to which it

complied with the Geneva Conventions. Remember when I was at the WJC -- I left in 1971 -- it was not yet the time of Israeli settlements of Palestinian land and intifadas. There was still hope that there would be a peace agreement which would end the occupation. However, looking back, the Six Day War was a turning point for Jewish organizations. Most if not all began to more openly defend the policies of Israel, and often overlooked the violations reported as a result of the occupation. It was the beginning of a big change in the Jewish community. Promoting international human rights and Israel's policies no longer always fit well together.

Q: Your main battles at this point were within the United Nations weren't they? Did you find that issues such as South Africa sort of sucked all the energy and resulted in the neglect of other places? I am thinking of the Soviets and the Chinese and all. They were doing some pretty nasty things.

COHEN: When I became the director of the International League for Human Rights in 1971, we regularly spoke out on South Africa; in fact we had the Rev. Michael Scott, who came from Rhodesia, as our representative on South Africa at the UN. But we also argued that human rights problems in the world were not confined to South Africa and that the UN should be addressing *all* human rights problems, including in the Soviet Union, which was regularly barred from raising at the UN. We were the first international group to affiliate with the Moscow Human Rights Committee, which I believe was the first NGO in the Soviet Union on human rights. It was led by Andrei Sakharov and other Soviet scientists, who were so courageous. We began to publicize cases of political prisoners they wanted the world to know about and we helped some dissidents get exit permits. We also tried to get through the information blockade by providing to Sakharov and the Moscow Human Rights Committee information they requested. For example, they wanted to read the texts of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Human Rights which the USSR had ratified but which were not available in Moscow, even at the UN information office, staffed by a cowardly bunch. We used to try to mail these documents to Sakharov, but he didn't receive them so each month we called Valery Chalidze of the Moscow Committee, Sakharov's colleague to read out the texts over the phone, paragraph by paragraph, and he would write them down. Sometimes we spoke with Sakharov. The calls were monitored and often cut off but we got information through. We also succeeded in getting some mail through after challenging the Soviet Union's non-compliance with the Universal Postal Convention; as a result the Moscow Committee began to receive some copies of human rights instruments in Russian. On the days we called Sakharov, the KGB often tried to directly intimidate us by coming to the League office. It was housed in the Church Center building opposite the UN. In addition, a number of Russians who worked in the UN building would call us up as a form of harassment.

Q: What did they say?

COHEN: In a heavy Russian accent, they would say, "We are calling on behalf of the United Nations and want to know about the activities of the International League. Who are your officers? Who is on the board?" I would respond, "We are pleased to provide

information about the League to the United Nations, but the United Nations doesn't make requests in this manner. When it requests information, it sends a formal letter and the reason for the request." I would then ask who wanted the information and what division they worked for. Sometimes they gave a name, but usually a different name from the one who called. It turned out they were at the UN Human Rights Division but when I went over there, they pretended no one had asked for information or that the one who did was not there. Sometimes a blond man from *Konsomolskaya Pravda* would arrive at the office on the day of the Sakharov call to request information. Unlike the ones in the UN, he smiled and was very friendly, picking up whatever brochures we had around. Once he asked, "Where really is the League?" It was such a small office he couldn't imagine we had the kind of influence they thought we did. Another time he asked why we bothered with Sakharov; no one knew who he was in the Soviet Union, he counted for nothing. I replied, "So why are you here?"

Q: How did you treat the U.S. government and its agencies, as a helper or as a problem or something to be avoided? How did you treat them?

COHEN: The better question would be how the U.S. government treated us. In a show of incredible ignorance, the U.S. decided the League was a communist organization. I found this out through the Freedom of Information Act. I wrote for my and the International League's file under this Act because we could never get our tax exemption. What came back shocked me. Because the League had been writing letters to the Soviet government and to East European states, the US government concluded that the League was a communist organization. The FBI did not open our mail, so it did not realize that these letters were all protest letters. Nor did it register with the FBI that the Soviet Union had publicly called for the League's expulsion from the UN which had made the newspapers. What did register with the FBI was that the League had been critical of the United States. It was actually before my time at the organization that the League had protested the U.S. secret bombing of Cambodia as a violation of international law. As a result, J. Edgar Hoover had scribbled on a piece of paper that no one should deal with the League. One of the consequences of our being considered a communist organization was that we couldn't get our tax exempt status, which was very hurtful since contributors could not claim tax exemptions. It was an effort to impoverish the organization.

I should mention too that when I received my own personal file from the FBI, I was informed that I was a member of the communist party and married to the actor, John Garfield. He had been a member of the Hollywood Ten and had run afoul of Senator McCarthy. His wife's name was Roberta Cohn (she became Cohn by a second marriage after Garfield's death) and the FBI had mixed us up even though she married Garfield before I was born.

Q: Yes, Garfield died in the 50's as I recall because I was a GI in Korea when he died.

COHEN: Well I sent back to the FBI the file they sent me and cleared up my own name. I also got lawyers at the League to challenge the determination that it was a communist organization. In that we succeeded as well and when we applied for tax exempt status, the

organization quickly received it. Otherwise, the relationship of the League to the U.S. government was what you would expect of a government and a human rights NGO. It was both cooperative and adversarial. We pressed the United States to incorporate human rights issues into its foreign policy both on specific countries and across the board and we held a big conference to examine how the U.S. could use its influence to promote greater implementation of human rights standards. State Department officials were present at our meeting and a set of 75 recommendations were put forward. The recommendations made the *New York Times,* and the new Carter Administration was quite interested in the conference report, and in fact invited me to join the State Department in part to carry out the recommendations.

Q: My understanding is a little bit foggy but wasn't it Congress that initiated the human rights policy even before President Carter? Were you lobbying the Congress?

COHEN: Yes, Congress initiated the human rights policy and Jimmy Carter later endorsed it and made it part of U.S. policy. As for my organization's "lobbying" Congress, there were restrictions on our doing so (we were not registered lobbyists), but we strongly supported Congressional action to promote greater attention to human rights in foreign policy. In 1974, the then chair of the International League, Jerry Shestack [Jerome J. Shestack, who later became U.S. Representative to the Commission on Human Rights and President of the American Bar Association] and I published an article on promoting human rights in U.S. foreign policy. Entitled "International Human Rights: A Role for the United States," it was published in the *Virginia Journal of International Law,* and strongly supported a more robust role for human rights in foreign policy. We were invited down to Washington to testify, and Jerry gave the testimony for the League expressing support for the State Department's greater promotion of human rights. In line with our article, he also expressed support for the publication of human rights reports by the State Department, the establishment of an office in the State Department on human rights, and a review of the human rights records of countries receiving U.S. military and economic aid. Donald Fraser served as chair of the Subcommittee on International Organizations and Movements (House Foreign Affairs Committee) that held the hearings and was generally recognized as the 'father' of the movement in Congress. His principal aide on the issue was John Salzburg, who had represented the International Commission of Jurists at the UN and had worked together with the League at the UN on human rights questions. We all collaborated and were on the same page on human rights and U.S. foreign policy.

Q: Well did you get any reaction from Nixon and particularly Henry Kissinger at all? Human rights were not high on his priority list, but did you get anything off of this about that time?

COHEN: Well, Kissinger had very plainly said when he became Secretary of State that he considered it dangerous for the domestic affairs of foreign countries to be a direct objective of U.S. foreign policy. But he was under pressure from Congress and the public, and when I say the public I mean not only human rights organizations, which in those days were small and few in number, but labor unions, church groups, scientific

groups and lawyers associations supporting a change in U.S. foreign policy. Overall, these groups called for restrictions on U.S. military and economic aid to governments repressing their citizens. Kissinger, however, didn't want any and initially forbade the publication of reports on human rights conditions in aid-recipient countries requested by Congress. When Congress then compelled the State Department to submit reports, Kissinger was forced to make some compromises. An office was set up on human rights in the State Department and the Department began to prepare reports on human rights conditions in countries receiving US military and economic aid. To be sure, the reports were watered down versions of the real human rights situation in those countries and State Department officers called to testify before Congress censored their remarks. In fact, I remember hearing the testimony of a Foreign Service Officer who defended the Stroessner regime in Paraguay, which had a terrible human rights record -- I had sent a mission to that country -- and there were others who whitewashed the human rights record of other countries. But human rights were definitely coming to the fore, especially after the Vietnam War, Watergate and the overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile with U.S. involvement. Even Kissinger couldn't stem the tide.

As for me personally, I appeared on some panels with State Department officials who were defending Kissinger's policies toward human rights and I challenged them; I also authored a chapter in a book taking issue with Kissinger's positions ["Human Rights Decision-Making in the Executive Branch: Some Proposals for a Coordinated Strategy," *Human Rights and American Foreign Policy,* University of Notre Dame, 1979]. I know it was circulated at the State Department.

Q: Was there a whole cadre of activist NGOs on this thing? Were you part of a movement?

COHEN: In Washington, there was a very active NGO "Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy" that pressed for attention to human rights. However, I was in New York, heavily focused at the UN and on sending missions to different countries on human rights situations (e.g. Northern Ireland, Greece, Paraguay) – a new undertaking altogether, publicizing situations (e.g. the India emergency, the Kurds of Iraq) and dealing with individual cases (family reunifications, prisoners). I also was heavily involved in trying to support the work of affiliated groups around the world like the Moscow Human Rights Committee. When it came to the NGOs in Washington, I agreed with a lot of their efforts but found that I wasn't always in sync with their focus. I agreed with their questioning of US military and police aid to countries with appalling human rights records but I also saw that they paid no heed to human rights violations in communist countries like the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Although these countries received no security or economic aid from the U.S., their human rights records were also appalling. Yet they considered concern with human rights in those countries as part of "the cold war." I strongly objected to their willingness to write off concern about Andrei Sakharov and the Moscow Human Rights Committee as some anti-communist Cold War ploy. So a split developed between the League and some of the Washington Coalition. My opposition to their narrow focus is well documented, most recently in a book by William Korey [*NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Curious Grapevine,* St. Martin's Press,

1998]. In it, the author quotes from a letter I wrote to the Coalition. [The letter says: "I cannot imagine that any member of the Coalition would wish to harm the Soviet human rights movement and withdraw from it a needed spotlight. And yet, the open letter published by the Coalition appeals for just that. By labeling US concern for human rights in the Soviet Union a Cold War weapon, the Coalition would appear to be calling for a halt to US statements of concern about the mistreatment of Soviet dissidents. …Human rights must be universally applied and spotlighted all over the world. There can not be one standard on human rights for US allies or aid recipients and another standard for communist countries. Any effort by the Coalition to perpetuate this point of view is quite dangerous to the solidarity of the human rights movement and destructive to human rights itself."]

Q: Why do you feel they were, was it they were conserving their energy, or was it just that they were fighting the cultural battle over Vietnam again? What was motivating them?

COHEN: Some, I believe, suffered from a knee jerk antagonism to anti-communism going all the way back to the McCarthy period which made it difficult for them to think in broader terms – that is, to understand that the human rights situation in communist countries needed a lot of attention. But mainly, I think, a number had tunnel vision. They were angered by the US' shoring up of regimes that were highly repressive and therefore did not concern themselves with the terrible violations in states not receiving U.S. aid. I don't think the NGOs were conserving their energy or being strategic. In the case of Congress, it took until 1979 for it to request the State Department to prepare human rights reports on *all* countries, not just non-communist countries receiving U.S. military or economic aid. Fortunately, members of Congress were ready to admit that they had overlooked communist countries in their initial focus on human rights and that had to be remedied. Of course the Helsinki Final Act of 1975 did apply to the communist countries but it took some time for the human rights dimension of the Act to be carried forward by the U.S.

Q: How long were you with this organization?

COHEN: I was with the International League for six years. In 1977 I received a call from the Carter Administration asking whether I would be interested in working for the Bureau of Human Rights. And I accepted with enthusiasm. Had I not cleared up my security files, however -- you know those FBI files about the League being communist and my supposed marriage to John Garfield -- I would not have gotten my security clearance.

Q: It is really scary.

COHEN: Yes, it is. I don't know how many other people they are just plain wrong about, and then there was the question of how they reached their conclusions.

Q: You would think they would have read the letters to the communist countries.

COHEN: Actually it was to their credit that they didn't, but their faulty assumptions and logic make one wonder what their judgments were based upon.

Q: There are still a lot of problems with this today even though they have a much more sure file system. I am not sure what is behind the files, the naming system, because a lot of people are named Mohammed.

COHEN: I wouldn't want to be a Moslem activist in America today. My own story I wrote up in a magazine in London in 1992. I hope that the FBI's analysis and dealing with individual files have improved. ["Conspiracy or Cockup," *Index on Censorship*, November 1992.]

Q: There is always hope. Ok you came into a brand new bureau, the Human Rights Bureau in 1977. How were you approached; let's talk about early days.

COHEN: Well people heading the Bureau had some knowledge of my work. I was the director of the only U.S.-based international human rights NGO and had become well known in a field that was newly developing. It was a small pool of people. I was active at the UN, had published articles, and was quoted in the newspapers. In fact, a major article in the *New York Times* in 1977 on the human rights movement carried my picture together with the head of Amnesty International USA, David Hawk. And I was the *NY Times* quotation of the day for saying that human rights was suddenly "chic" -- that for years human rights advocates had been considered optimists and dreamers but now we were respectable. I didn't know Patt then, but it wasn't surprising that I would want to work there and that I would be contacted.

Q: You are talking about Patt Derian?

COHEN: Yes. Patt [Patricia M. Derian] was the Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights; it was her deputy who called me, Mark Schneider. He asked if I would like to come down for an interview. I believe a former American Ambassador, Ben Stephansky, who went on a League mission to Paraguay, recommended me. When I went down to Washington, I was interviewed by Mark and then Patt and later became a political appointee. Unlike other political appointees, it wasn't because I worked in the campaign but because I had a special expertise that interested them.

Q: Well when did you come in?

COHEN: I came in at the beginning of 1978. There was a long wait -- you know how the hiring process is, with freezes and whatever. And in addition, I wanted a month or two at the League to put its files in order as well as those of a lawyer's committee of pro bono lawyers set up to help the League [it became the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, now named Human Rights First]. At that time the League was an influential organization. Now it no longer exists, but then it was one of the players. [Its records are at the NY Public Library.] In the 1970s there were only a few active international human rights organizations, most notably the League, Amnesty International in London and the

International Commission of Jurists in Geneva. I was the first person from a human rights NGO to be invited to work at the State Department. [In the book, *International Human Rights Movement: A History*, by Aryeh Neier, Princeton University Press, 2012, I was described in the 1970s as "probably the country's most experienced human rights professional" p. 345, n.9]

Q: When you arrived at the Human Rights Bureau in '78, how did you find the atmosphere in the Bureau?

COHEN: Active, excited, and enthusiastic about carrying out a new policy. And oh so busy, no one even had time to have lunch with me! You just had to jump in. Most of the staff was a pretty solidly knit group of people who believed in the human rights policy and wanted to promote it. At times, there was an 'us against them' mentality with the rest of the building, but not always. Elliott Abrams, who became Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights during the Reagan Administration, criticized the bureau during Carter's time for acting too much like an NGO in the State Department. Well we often had to band together in terms of what we wanted to accomplish, and Patt made clear to everybody that she wanted us to be advocates in the building for human rights, turn things around when we had to and get the policy integrated into United States foreign policy. Given the newness of the subject and the resistant attitude of so many others in the building, I don't see how else we could have proceeded.

Q: I was on the country team in South Korea at the time, and you were, I won't say the enemy but you were sure stirring things up. We in South Korea were fixated, and with good reason on some 30 divisions within a distance like the one between the Washington Monument and Dulles Airport. Park Chung-hee was the dictator and he wanted his army to be strong. Where you stand is where you sit, and we were sitting in Seoul. But could you tell me about what you were doing and particularly your experiences operating in the department?

COHEN: Not being a Foreign Service Officer (FSO), I had to learn a lot. I wasn't used to the clearance process for one -- other bureaus signing off on my and others' work and trying to change it. I wasn't used to the hierarchy of officers in Washington or the role of Embassies. But most of all I wasn't used to the resistance I encountered to carrying out the policy. I came from an NGO where we all were united in our commitment to human rights. Sure we had our differences on different issues, but our objectives were the same. In the State Department, different bureaus had different objectives and they resisted carrying out the human rights policy if it proved harmful to their other objectives. So while my job was to integrate human rights into foreign policy, others in the building and at embassies feared it would upset relations with foreign governments and undermine U.S. interests and sought to downplay or obstruct it. Part of the problem was known as 'clientism,' that is when FSOs treat foreign governments as clients for whom they advocate and to whom they defer and forget they're representing the government of the United States and its values. You would be surprised to know that 'clientism' in the State Department sometimes extended to countries in the communist world. I remember the desk officer on East Germany telling me that the Berlin Wall should be described in the

human rights reports as an "economic development" measure -- obviously more palatable to the East German government. In the case of Chile, the desk officer was enamored of the Chilean military and wanted me to know that although there were arms sanctions against the government on human rights grounds, there was much to praise about the Chilean military. They were "as good as the Wehrmacht," he told me. He must have known I was Jewish. He told me this at a lunch when we were introduced; I remember wondering where the State Department found such people. And the Brazil desk was ready to support Brazil's refusal to extradite Nazi war criminals to Germany for trials. The officer seemed largely unaware of the Nürnberg tribunal and argued that these crimes took place too long ago. I had to explain and bring the legal office in to explain that there was no statute of limitations for war crimes and crimes against humanity and that bringing Nazi war criminals to justice was something the Justice Department and the U.S. government were committed to.

Ignorance of human rights was more widespread at State than I had imagined. I had followed this issue professionally for some 12 years. But only a few bureaus -- the International Organizations Bureau (Assistant Secretary Bill Maynes and Warren Hewitt), the Legal Adviser's Office (the extraordinary Charlie Runyon), some staff in USAID (Jonathan Silverstone and Marilyn Zak) and a few others like Abe Sirkin from Policy Planning -- knew what human rights standards meant. And the Foreign Service Institute introduced some training in human rights (I actually helped with the training when I was at the League) but it wasn't mandatory. For the most part, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the international human rights treaties developed since the Second World War were largely unknown by Department staff, including in the Human Rights bureau. Even in the legal office I remember one officer's expressing caution about the U.S.' ratification of the Genocide Convention on the grounds that the U.S. had to protect its soldiers (he had Vietnam in mind) and also, he seemed to think the U.S. should have as much flexibility as possible. "To commit genocide?" I asked. The U.S. didn't ratify the Genocide Convention until 1988.

Then there were others in the U.S. government who had a different understanding of the human rights policy altogether. Soon after my arrival at HA, I was asked to address what turned out to be an overflowing audience at Langley to hear about the human rights policy. While some CIA officers derided the policy ("nothing but John Stuart Mill," one officer yelled out contemptuously), others came up to me afterwards to offer their services. What they had in mind was taking out human rights violators, in particular heads of state. Of course, that was not what we had in mind for the human rights policy. Moreover, Patt had made clear that she did not want the policy in any way mixed up with intelligence activities. I should note that CIA officers were at different times helpful with information, especially when we wanted to know if torture had been stopped in various detention centers. But their overall view of human rights was a far cry from ours.

Q: What about your responsibilities?
Initially I was hired to be the human rights officer for international organizations (e.g. United Nations), serve as senior adviser on the US Delegation to the UN Commission on Human Rights and General Assembly and serve as liaison with the non-governmental

human rights community. But on my very first day I was asked to serve in addition as the human rights officer for the southern cone of Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay) because the appointed officer hadn't yet shown up. And I was called in on a temporary basis to serve as human rights officer for the Soviet Union, act as a backstop more generally on the USSR (given my background), and follow Iran (when Steve Cohen was absent). And I was asked to supervise the Bureau's research projects funded by INR (Intelligence and Research Bureau) and USAID. And so many other things too. The Human Rights Bureau was new and small and overstretched, and everyone had to do more than they could manage.

As human rights officer for the Southern Cone, I had to interact with the Inter-American Bureau (ARA) to try to ensure that the US raised human rights violations in its discussions with Latin American governments, issued public statements when needed, abstained or voted against loans in the development banks, reduced or cut off economic and security aid on human rights grounds (where not already cut off), took positive steps when merited, voted at the UN for resolutions criticizing Southern Cone governments, and provided candid information about human rights conditions for the human rights reports. Accomplishing these goals involved almost daily negotiations with ARA officers – sometimes with memos flying, or formal action memoranda setting forth our bureau's and their bureau's positions, to be decided by the Deputy Secretary.

Generally the officers in ARA preferred weaker implementation of the human rights policy than our bureau although some were on board with the policy. Ambassadors like Robert White (Paraguay and El Salvador) and Lawrence Pezzullo (Uruguay and Nicaragua), for example, saw the policy as being in U.S. interests, because they felt that at some point the Pinochets, Stroessners and Videlas of this world [the heads of state of Chile, Paraguay and Argentina] would be replaced and that it was important for the U.S. to be on the right side of human rights issues and have a good relationship with the opposition. They also were not comfortable supporting governments that were crudely and systematically disappearing and torturing people and found ways to distance the U.S. from these practices. Critical to our bureau was the legislation passed by Congress which required aid to be conditioned on human rights grounds and specifically restricted aid to Chile and Argentina. Also quite helpful were the President's statements and those made by the Secretary of State [Cyrus Vance] and the Deputy Secretary [Warren Christopher] explaining the human rights policy and the tools to carry it out.

Nonetheless, senior officials at the U.S. Embassy in Buenos Aires blocked cables to Washington that were too negative about human rights conditions. It took a courageous officer at the embassy Tex Harris [F. Allen Harris] who risked his career to send candid reports on human rights back to Washington – he forwarded them to our bureau by pouch when the Embassy held up his cables. However, even those in ARA who supported the human rights policy sometimes argued against implementing it too stringently because they said they needed the leverage that economic and military aid afforded to influence governments. Some ARA officials even sought to make sure that "the pipeline" (previous arms deliveries) continued when the US decided to disallow new sales or aid on human rights grounds. We constantly had to contend with the view that human rights promotion

would complicate US relations and undermine other political, economic and security interests. Sometimes it paraded under the rationale that doing less would accomplish more for human rights. Against that background, I successfully worked to get a demarche made to the Paraguayan government about the arrest of a particular opposition leader (Domingo Laino) and it helped to get him out. I also was the host in my bureau for the visit of two Paraguayan generals and explained the human rights policy to them and what we expected of Paraguay. I knew more about Paraguay than others because of my work at the League but my being made the host was obviously a way of telling them that they would not be received at a more senior level because of their human rights record. I received them in Patt's office and I remember trying to be as diplomatic as I could but also forthright in raising human rights issues. ARA officers sat in on the meeting. I raised a particular political arrest with the top general and he promised the man would not be sent to prison (and I believe he wasn't); I emphasized the importance of Paraguay's receiving a visit by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, and he promised it would take place; and I raised the permanent state of siege in Paraguay which suspended all civil liberties but didn't get far. And I raised the treatment of the indigenous population. At the UN I also raised the state of siege where I represented the U.S. in a meeting on Paraguay and other countries, and I was glad to see from a cable that the Embassy (Bob White) endorsed this.

In the case of Chile, Mark was the point person although I was brought in on different issues, including making the case against Chile's restrictions on the right to return for political exiles. We wanted our Embassy to raise this issue and needed a brief which they didn't seem to have. I remember officers from the Chilean Embassy trying to wine and dine me (they even sent over a case of wine at Christmas – which I handed over to some Department office because I wouldn't accept it). I did succeed in maintaining that U.S. yes vote at the UN against their human rights record until I left the Department. We had to fight that battle just about every year. To head off a change in 1980, I hinted I would not sign off on a memo on an issue of greater importance to them, and ARA backed off. I was told they said "Cohen pulled one of her rabbits out of a hat." I remember also being involved in the Department's position on Chile's plebiscite in 1980 that put off democratic rule.

In the case of Argentina, Patt was the strong force insisting on constancy in the U.S. human rights policy toward Argentina, raised hell when she visited the country, and was credited with getting Jacobo Timerman and others out of prison and with an overall reduction in disappearances.

Q: Could you explain what disappearances are?

COHEN: Disappearances meant the abduction of people on political or other grounds without warrant or judicial procedure. Men often dressed in civilian clothes would come to the victim's house or kidnap the person off the street and take them away and no one would ever hear from them again. The disappearances were mostly state sponsored and those who disappeared were for the most part tortured and murdered. Argentina was the

country with most disappearances although they also took place in other Southern Cone countries like Uruguay and Paraguay.

Our Bureau's position was that the more than ten thousand disappearances in Argentina had to be a priority for the U.S. in its dealing with that country. At the Embassy, some of the senior people argued that the U.S. should drop the issue because as they put it, "dead is dead," these people are gone, let's move on and try to improve relations. These same Embassy people also argued that the abducted people were 'terrorists' so "good riddance" to them. The Human Rights Bureau with the help of officers at the Embassy who did not espouse the Embassy line collected information which showed that a lot of these people were not terrorists at all. Many may have been on the left of the political spectrum but they were not engaged in terrorism. A good number were students and professionals: journalists, professors, teachers, labor union leaders, nuns -- a much broader range of people than the Argentine government and some in the Embassy admitted. We argued that the issue was a political time bomb in Argentina and that it was essential to try to find out what happened to these people, deter future disappearances, and hold persons responsible for abducting and murdering them. We predicted that the issue would not go away until it was dealt with and it was in U.S. interests over the longer term to be on the right side of this question. I believe the Human Rights Bureau got it right. Argentina's Ambassador to the U.S. today is none other than Timerman's son who held a big dinner in honor of Patt Derian and spoke about how resolving the disappearances had remained an important issue in Argentina over the decades. I was at the dinner and was so glad that our Bureau had held fast during the Carter Administration, insisting that the issue should not be sidelined. Had we not done so, then David Newsom, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs would not have raised the issue when he visited Argentina in 1978. Our Bureau managed to get into his briefing book a memorandum on torture and disappearances. I was the one tasked to write it and was told it could be no more than one page, the issue should be stated clearly and fairly, and the deadline was the first thing in the morning. I remember staying up half the night trying to frame the issue effectively and condense all the material we had into a page and a quarter. The memo was approved without change and put in the book, and the subject was raised during the visit.

At the UN, I also worked on the disappearance issue, this time with the head of the US delegation to the Commission on Human Rights Jerry Shestack [Jerome J. Shestack, my former chair at the International League for Human Rights]. I must admit I strongly complained about the previous U.S. representative, a former Congressman who did not have a good grasp of these issues and I called for a change of leadership, was backed by HA, IO and the Deputy Secretary and got one – Jerry was brought in. In Geneva, we worked hard to mobilize support at the Commission to create a working group on disappearances. I had to negotiate intensively with the different blocs while the Argentine government strenuously campaigned against our efforts, threatening delegations with political repercussions, ending trade deals etc. But we succeeded and the disappearances working group continues today as a well-functioning body, working on cases of disappeared people in all parts of the world although its initial focus was Argentina. Our success – and it was a very complicated series of actions -- made the Argentine government complain to the State Department about our role at the Commission and at

one point, ARA boycotted briefings given by Jerry on the session, but the International Organizations Bureau, the US Mission to the UN Geneva, and the Deputy Secretary's office commended us for being the driving force behind the creation of an important mechanism for human rights in line with the President's and Administration's objectives. I remember Jerry sent me a note in Geneva after the vote that said, "for this one you will go to heaven." I kept it and still have it.

Maintaining a strong human rights policy toward Argentina, however, was not easy. In 1978, for example, the US announced it would deny Eximbank (Export-Import Bank) credits to the Argentine government on human rights grounds but then reversed its position in the Allis Chalmers case because business interests and economic and political goals counted for more. The U.S. nonetheless managed to obtain an agreement from the Argentine government to accept an on-site visit by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, but Eximbank was never again turned to for human rights purposes. It was a defeat, but a human rights objective was incorporated into the decision. The U.S. also sold military spare parts to the Argentine military when human rights violations in the country were at their peak. U.S. officials argued that a complete cutoff would deprive the U.S. of a bargaining tool essential for inducing improvements. I'll leave it to history to decide whether the argument was legitimate. Congress felt it had enough of this rationale when it imposed a statutory arms embargo on Argentina in October 1978. However, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the US began to make plans for improving relations with Argentina. In 1980 Patt publicly threatened to resign in order to maintain a continuation of the human rights policy.

Argentina's role in the brutal overthrow of a democratically elected government in Bolivia helped put a stop to some of the State Department's planned actions. Relations also deteriorated over issues like the Argentine government's pursuit of a nuclear program without international safeguards; and its failure to restrict grain exports to the Soviet Union after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Some blamed the human rights policy for this, but I believe economic self-interest played the decisive role. One should never forget that Argentina – well before the human rights policy -- entered World War II on the side of the Axis because of its perceived interests.

Efforts in ARA to warm relations with Argentina persisted and even extended to whether or not the U.S. would congratulate former political prisoner Adolfo Perez Esquivel for winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1980. The Argentine government began to discredit his reputation and some in ARA wanted to go along with that. The Argentine line essentially was that only violent terrorists were the victims of the 'dirty war,' so therefore Perez Esquivel must have been so connected. But HA argued that this Roman Catholic lay leader was arrested and tortured for non-violent acts in defense of peasants and workers. In fact, the U.S. had earlier made demarches for him -- he had been a high-interest U.S. case, and the Nobel Prize described him as a light during the height of the disappearances. This disagreement went to Christopher who agreed to a positive statement about Perez Esquivel's winning the award and also agreed to receive him; on his decision, he wrote something to the effect that it would be a sorry day in U.S. history if the government would not see those who received the Nobel Peace Prize.

In 1980, I became Deputy Assistant Secretary of State responsible for economic and security assistance, which encompassed Bank loans, military aid and sales and police equipment for all geographic regions as well as overseeing Latin America, the UN and relations with NGOs.

Q: I think this would be a good place to stop. But then I would like to start the next time we are talking about the personalities you had to deal with in the Human Rights Bureau because there were some very strong opinions on this. It was your Bureau against the rest of the organization. How Patt Derian operated and some of the opposition -- we will talk a lot about that.

COHEN: Very well.

Q: Roberta, where did we leave off? Did you have things you wish to add?

COHEN: You asked about the personalities in the Bureau. Let me point out that the Bureau was a mix of FSOs and political appointees. Patt Derian, for example, unlike assistant secretaries who were FSOs, had no career ambitions in the State Department. She was outspoken and could afford to be. She had a direct connect to President Carter and was brought in to implement US law and the Presidential Directive to integrate human rights into foreign policy. In fact, she always kept cartons in her office as a reminder that she would pack up and leave if she had to. The other political appointees in the Bureau, Mark Schneider and Steve Cohen, also did not plan to make a career in the State Department; they were not as a result always weighing and measuring what they said and did in terms of a future career in that building. Mark left of his own volition to rejoin Senator Kennedy and Steve returned to Georgetown Law School. I too was not interested in a career at the State Department, although I was encouraged to apply because they were looking for women in the mid-career program and I had very high efficiency reports. But I did not want to become an FSO. I was at State for one reason alone – to implement the human rights policy. A write up of the human rights bureau, I remember, featured a photo of Patt, Mark, Steve and myself under the heading, "A classic outsider and her top staff" ["Human Rights: The Carter Record, The Reagan Reaction," Part Two, *International Policy Report*, by Caleb Rossiter, September 1984].

Career officers in the Bureau had a different perspective. To be sure, some had joined because of a genuine interest in human rights and were ready to use their contacts in the building to promote the policy's goals or at least up to a point. Charlie Salmon, Michele Bova, Terry Tull, Bob Jacobs and Bob Maxim were good examples. But others were more cautious because they feared that if they became too adversarial in their relations with the regional bureaus, it would jeopardize their careers. Others were less committed. One, I remember, who was close with the military and critical of the policy didn't last long in the Bureau. Another came into my office to tell me that if ever there were a conflict between human rights and U.S. interests, he would choose U.S. interests. I assured him no such choice would ever be required of him. Still another sent to us by the East Asian Bureau didn't do anything on human rights – that was EA's intention in

sending him -- and I found we had to work around him. When I passed his office one day, he was staring out the window and he actually said to me, "Oh I was daydreaming as I am wont to do." Another case was a far more serious one and at a more senior level. He was brought in to replace Mark, and had been chosen as the principal Deputy Assistant Secretary because he was an FSO and presumably would work well with the rest of the building. By 1979 and 1980, Patt was looking for career people to fill senior positions in the Bureau. The policy, she felt, could not be allowed to depend on a specific administration's political appointees; it should be promoted by FSOs and become integrated on a long term basis into Department decision making. This FSO, however, apparently believed that he and the Bureau would be better served by not making waves and by not speaking up. He began to compromise away HA's human rights goals I believe in order to advance his own career.

Q: Who was that?

COHEN: That can be figured out. He was so inactive it actually upset some FSOs in the Bureau who came to tell me. But more to the point, the Deputy Secretary of State complained to Patt. In her absence (she was out of DC), he witnessed the Bureau not doing its job effectively. The Deputy Secretary expected the Bureau to be the Department's advocate for human rights even if others in the building were not in agreement.

Q: Who was the Deputy Secretary?

COHEN: Warren Christopher. Following his conversation with Patt, I was *de facto* given the responsibilities of the principal deputy. I didn't become the *de jure* principal deputy, but I was given most of his job in addition to my own.

Q: Basically the complaint from Warren Christopher was that the Bureau was not pushing the cause enough, was that it?

COHEN: Yes.

Q: Because this was a mandate obviously from Congress.

COHEN: Not only from Congress but from the White House. There was a Presidential Directive, PD 30 that spelled out the US promotion of human rights as government policy, and there were statements by the Secretary and Deputy Secretary on what the human rights policy meant and how it ought to be carried out.

Q: Did Warren Christopher bring the geographic bureaus to task on this?

COHEN: No, because they were doing their job. It was our Bureau that he didn't think was doing its job at a meeting of the 'Christopher committee' he chaired. The committee made decisions on the extent to which economic aid should be extended or denied to governments on human rights grounds. I was present at the meeting and saw this officer,

who was in charge of the East Asia portfolio of our Bureau, say absolutely nothing when loans came up on countries in East Asia with serious human rights violations. And a big briefing book had been prepared for him on the countries. Well, Christopher was the consummate lawyer and expected two sides of the story to be presented before he would make a decision. Hearing only one side made him feel that the process was not working, and he told Patt. Our Bureau, whether popular or not, was supposed to carry out the human rights policy.

Q: Well, what about the rest of the Bureau? Were they holding back too?

COHEN: FSOs in and outside the Bureau were aware by early 1980 that the Carter Administration was in trouble and by extension, the human rights policy was also in trouble, especially after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and Cold War concerns occupied front and center of foreign policy. Outside the building, those supporting Ronald Reagan had begun to attack the policy and the Bureau, and in particular made the erroneous argument that the fall of the Shah and Somoza was because of the policy. To be sure, committed FSOs in the Bureau and the building continued to give attention to human rights concerns, but many FSOs became sensitive to the writing on the wall and began adjusting their actions and views to what they perceived a new administration might espouse. One of my staff gave me a draft human rights speech that would have fit the Reagan Administration while a DAS in ARA told me that he was not going to continue to be so out front in support of the policy because he had a wife and family to think about. I should mention that Patt went out of her way to try to ensure that FSOs working in the Bureau went on to good positions and this extended to some outside the Bureau advocating for human rights. She wanted to ensure that no one would be penalized for advocating for human rights, and several went on to ambassadorial assignments. But promoting human rights began to be balanced more carefully by members of the Foreign Service mindful of their careers.

Q: There were a lot of places where we had more than human rights on hand to consider. As I mentioned before I was consul general in Seoul, and we had an overriding problem, and that was the North Koreans. There was concern that overemphasizing human rights might cause unrest in the South and give the North Koreans an opportunity to do something. I mean this was the rationale. There were certainly other places where competing objectives came up.

COHEN: With regard to South Korea, there was a big meeting at the Brookings Institution in 2007 on human rights and US foreign policy in Asia. And Thomas Hubbard, a former U.S. ambassador to South Korea spoke. He argued that the Carter Administration and subsequent administrations carried out the human rights policy towards South Korea too weakly and that as a result, South Koreans including those in the government today resent the U.S. government for not protecting them from military dictatorships and human rights violations when the US had the authority to do so; for example not stepping in to prevent the Kwangju massacre in 1980. Hubbard argued that the failure to advocate strongly enough for human rights had created a good deal of anti-American resentment among government people today. I never met Ambassador

Hubbard before, but during the Carter Administration, the Human Rights Bureau also argued that it was important to look not only at the short term but at the long term, and who the new government in South Korea and also in the Philippines would be and whether the people in the country would resent the U.S. for not promoting democracy and human rights. How effectively can it be argued that it is in U.S. interests to be closely aligned with a government which does not have the support of its own population? When opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, who was nearly killed by the government, became president of South Korea in 1998, Patt was on his list to be invited to the inauguration.

Q: I was in South Korea at the time of the Carter Administration and it was argued that if you weakened the Park Chung Hee government too much, the North Koreans might invade. That was a real possibility then. It isn't today. The North Korean threat became less after time, although it still exists.

COHEN: I believe that the fear that there could be a North Korean invasion was more related to a statement Carter made before coming into office. He said he would like to reduce the number of American troops in the South, although once in office, he pulled back from that position. As for the human rights policy, the argument was made that any criticism of South Korea's military government could weaken it, make it more vulnerable. But the goal of the human rights policy was to strengthen stability in South Korea by having a stronger democratic foundation. A government locking up and torturing its political opposition and firing on protesters gave little room for the development of democratic institutions that could provide long term stability and attract the popular support and strength needed to repel a North Korean invasion. The argument that the human rights policy would weaken the South Korean government in my opinion was often overblown or overstated.

Q: It could have been. Or it might seem so from hindsight. Of course you mentioned the withdrawal of the second division which Carter had been promoting. This made those of us in South Korea feel that there could be a real disaster. I mean it was after Vietnam and this could open the door to the North Koreans. So there was a certain feeling against trusting the Carter Administration. We felt that they didn't know what they were talking about. As for the human rights policy, you were up against arguments against it all over the world. The old Foreign Service after all was used to dealing in old ways. I hasten to add that diplomats and politicians all over the world were asking what the hell these Americans were doing pushing this policy. You were the revolutionaries in a cause which has, however, turned out to be beneficial.

COHEN: Yes, the new policy upset the traditional way the career service operated. Suddenly, FSOs were expected to factor the human rights records of countries into the decisions they were making about military and economic aid, add human rights to talking points with foreign governments and factor human rights into decisions on whether or not a foreign leader would be invited to the US. Some FSOs saw the value of taking into account the nature of a regime in determining the US relationship with that government. Others felt doing so could sidetrack other objectives and often as a result exaggerated the impact of applying the human rights policy. Take the sale of police equipment to China.

EA [the East Asian Bureau] argued as did Policy Planning and EB [Economic and Business] Bureaus that not selling such equipment would damage newly normalized relations with China. The U.S, they said, had to strengthen this relationship so as to counter Soviet power and gain greater influence in Asia. The human rights situation, EA argued, was also improving in China compared with what it was during the Cultural Revolution. Our Bureau countered that there was still a very large prison population in China, including labor camps in which many Chinese were incarcerated on political grounds. While we did not oppose military sales to strengthen relations, we saw no extraordinary circumstances that could warrant police equipment to assist the PRC in exercising internal controls over its own people. Deputy Secretary Christopher agreed with our Bureau. He did not see why the U.S. had to aid China's government in repressing its own population, so he banned the proposed sale of police equipment. I was heavily involved in this case and remember thinking we may not win it with so many bureaus stacked against us, but we did. I always remember when Christopher's office called me and said, "We want you to be the first to know." It's set out in an article I wrote. [See Roberta Cohen, "People's Republic of China: The Human Rights Exception," *Human Rights Quarterly*, Johns Hopkins, 1987].

There are of course plenty of instances where it's legitimate for other considerations to be more compelling than human rights. In the period when relations were first being normalized with China, Patt publicly stated that relations first had to be developed before leverage should be used to promote human rights. But there were too many other cases where overblown accounts of national security were relied upon to get arms and economic aid to enhance relationships at the expense of human rights. One blatant case came from NEA (Near Eastern Affairs Bureau). It proposed selling pistols to the government of Syria on national security grounds. Even though U.S. law prohibited sales to violators of Syria's rank, Syria, NEA argued, if denied weaponry would fail to protect the U.S. Embassy, which would put U.S. staff at risk. We responded that there was an international agreement governing the protection of diplomats and that this agreement could not be subject to blackmail; if FSOs faced serious risks in Damascus, the Department should withdraw them, and we were prepared to recommend that. NEA withdrew the request, but it was a perfect example of a regional bureau cooking up a story with national security overtones to bypass the human rights policy. Happened every day with different bureaus. In another instance, ARA wanted the U.S. to support the Guatemalan military – known not just for violations but atrocities -- to expand its influence over Belize, a British territory. The purpose was not to give Belize independence, but to extend Guatemala's influence over that territory so as to improve U.S.-Guatemalan relations. ARA cooked up some security rationale but I refused to clear it and insisted EUR [the European Bureau] be brought in. At that point, they dropped it.

Q: You mentioned that in carrying out the human rights policy, the State Department had to deal with NGOs, or non-governmental organizations, which had always been perceived as do-gooders and somewhere off to the side. Since I came into the Foreign Service in 1955 as a consular officer, I have dealt with NGOs. In fact I worked very closely with some on immigration matters. So I came at it differently. But for the most

part, NGOs were not held in particularly high standing at the State Department at that time.

COHEN: You're so right. The State Department was quite insulated from such groups. FSOs after all relied on information provided by embassies, which was often confidential. They did not particularly welcome cooperation with groups that operated in the public domain, that were outspoken and adversarial and regularly urged the U.S. government to pay greater attention to human rights. Indeed, it was non-governmental human rights groups, churches, professional associations, labor unions, scientific groups, and bar associations that pressed Congress to enact a human rights policy and implement it.

Presidential Directive 30 spoke of cooperation with the NGO community and because I came out of the NGO world, one of my first jobs at State was to be the liaison with NGOs. There had never been a position like that before. Most NGOs welcomed my being at State -- they now had an insider to call to enhance their cooperation with the Human Rights Bureau and the Department more broadly on the human rights issue. But others feared I had been co-opted by the government and was no longer one of them. For State Department staff, my many contacts outside the building proved useful but at the same time it made me suspect with FSOs outside HA. Some feared I might leak information to NGOs or do their bidding in some other way. So I found myself sometimes in a balancing act trying to establish common ground and gain the trust of both sides.

On the plus side, NGO information on human rights conditions in different countries was extremely valuable because Embassy officers were not used to collecting information about human rights conditions and sometimes there were problems with their forwarding that information like I mentioned from the embassy in Buenos Aires. NGO missions to different countries were also helpful because NGOs could speak with opposition leaders and human rights advocates more easily than FSOs. And sometimes it was easier for the U.S. to cite an NGO report in a diplomatic exchange than its own information. The State Department often used NGO information in its human rights reports.

At the same time, if NGOs demonstrated that there was 'a consistent pattern of gross violations in a country,' it could become the basis for the US' denying security assistance or police equipment to a government. So State Department officers were at times wary of NGO information. The regional bureaus after all generally preferred to focus on "improvements" instead of the violations reported by NGOs.

Q: Obviously someone who works for an NGO usually has a cause, so you have to deal with people who are pushing an agenda. Did you find that some were particularly good and solid and others weren't?

COHEN: Oh yes, sometimes NGO information was inflated or not entirely accurate. I had to help the Department identify the NGOs on whose information we could readily rely. In the late 1970s human rights NGOs were first coming into prominence. They were mostly small groups, some were shoestring operations, different from today's NGOs which have substantial budgets, large staff and professional standards with regard to the

accuracy of information. I made a directory of human rights organizations for the State Department and tried to include those who were particularly reliable and worth dealing with. Overall, I came down largely on the side of the international ones, which were less politicized in their approach, more experienced in dealing with governments, and had consultative status at the UN – like Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, the International League for Human Rights (Human Rights Watch did not yet exist) and also two new lawyers groups (the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (now Human Rights First) and the International Human Rights Law Group (now Global Rights) as well scientific groups like the AAAS (American Association for the Advancement of Science). Overall, they did a credible job of collecting and bringing forth needed information. Some other NGOs focused on particular countries or regions and were quite knowledgeable as well. There was a special group, for example, on South Korea headed by a former State Department official Donald Ranard, who was pushing for a more vigorous U.S. policy on human rights in South Korea. But not all NGOs had capabilities as great as we would have liked. I remember when I entered the State Department, I learned that one of the prisoners for whom a number of NGOs were campaigning was actually a CIA asset, and that's why he was in jail. But the organizations didn't know that and I couldn't tell them. Some NGOs had distinctly political agendas, even linked to particular political parties in foreign countries. Others knee-jerk criticized the State Department or castigated our Bureau for not fighting hard enough. It was a tricky mix of people to deal with but among that mix were spectacular human rights defenders and the true birth of what could be called a human rights movement in the United States.

Q: Well I had some dealings with Amnesty International in the early 70's. I was consul general in Athens at the time of the colonels. I found they were very solid. They were asking questions and I was responding to them. They were trying to see if a particular person was really somebody setting off bombs or if the person was arrested for promoting the cause of democracy. They would back off from what I would consider bad cases and latch on to solid ones. They were not very successful, however, in Greece which was under a dictatorship at the time.

COHEN: I remember that time. The International League and International Commission of Jurists sent a mission to Greece then to protect lawyers and the League also brought forward a complaint to the UN. At State, I sought to enlarge the access of NGOs to the Department so that their information, ideas and recommendations could be heard. I often organized meetings for NGOs with Ambassadors and State Department principals. I remember one I set up with Warren Christopher. The lawyers at the meeting, including Jerry Shestack, urged U.S. ratification of human rights treaties and Christopher responded that he would support the holding of hearings on these treaties, and hearings were held at which he, the Legal Adviser and Patt testified. So the relationship with NGOs could be quite productive.

At other times, the relationship could be more complicated. I remember a group of medical doctors in New York who formed an NGO, and told the Embassy in Montevideo that they wanted to send a mission to Uruguay. The Embassy contacted me and I talked

with the doctors and found them well-meaning but with little knowledge of Uruguay and little understanding of human rights. So I sent a cable pointing out that the group was not well prepared and identified another group planning to go to Uruguay that I recommended the Embassy work with, which it did. The medical group was angry but I wasn't going to waste the Embassy's time.

In another case, an NGO was planning a mission to El Salvador and was cooperating with the Inter-American Bureau. Prior to their departure, a prominent member of the NGO mission, Jack Greenberg [NAACP Legal Defense Fund], called and said: "We know you, and you know us. Are we going to be safe there, Roberta?" I remember pausing to think about that and I responded, "I don't think so." I had read Department cables about the security forces being "out of control" in El Salvador and while I could not tell him that, I could question the safety of the group. Following this conversation, the team members decided not to go and the head of the NGO [Michael Posner who decades later became Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights)] called angrily to complain that I had ruined their mission. But he later understood when newspaper headlines reported four American church women raped and murdered in El Salvador and two American labor advisors also murdered. The point I am making is that steering between the NGO world and the State Department wasn't always easy. I was not going to be dishonest with my colleagues in the NGO movement and tell them everything was fine when I knew it wasn't. It may have been a mission the NGO and the Embassy wanted but I couldn't go along with it.

Q: They might have gone and had to retreat under fire. That would have been worse than not having gone at all.

COHEN: I agree. On another occasion, NGOs came into the Department when a high level political opposition leader was arrested in Chile. They feared he would be tortured and the NGOs urged strong U.S. action and said they planned to use the media to expose the case. But the Ambassador in Santiago sent a message that he was working behind the scenes to try to get the person released and wanted no public statements for 24 to 48 hours. The Inter-American Bureau called me in to help with the NGOs. I had a high opinion of the Ambassador and thought the NGOs should follow his advice. I told them it was important for them to remain silent and give the Ambassador a chance to resolve the situation. I then left the room to let them decide what they would do. They decided to remain silent for 24 to 48 hours and the Ambassador did get the political leader out.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

COHEN: George Landau.

Q: The point being if you made a big fuss about this right at the beginning it would make it much harder for the government to back down and quietly release somebody. It was a matter of face almost. So the NGOs had to consider settling the matter without acting on the normal impulse to make a lot of publicity in order to get the person out. But that is what NGOs do rather than what diplomats do who say let's not make a fuss about it.

COHEN: Yes, and you can imagine how difficult it was for me to tell my former NGO colleagues to do nothing. If my advice were wrong, I realized I could have hurt that prisoner and in addition lose credibility and face with the NGOs.

My being in the middle of the State-NGO relationship sometimes put me at odds with State Department security officers. Their overall attitude toward NGOs and human rights was suspicious. Security officers seemed to assume that if NGOs obtained information and got it into the press, it had to come from me because I was the NGO liaison. Although in the Department, I was often introduced as one of its "acknowledged human rights experts," a security man came to my office and said, "We are looking for a human rights fanatic." I responded, "If you call me an advocate, I will talk with you." So he corrected himself and I spent 2 ½ hours being grilled by a team. They wondered whether I was leaking information to the press, referring to several press stories in the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* about Argentina and Paraguay, and asked if I would sign a sworn statement that I had not leaked information to the press or NGOs. I responded that I would gladly sign such a statement as long as they asked others involved with these countries to sign as well. They never did ask me to sign anything thereafter so I assume they dropped the idea. The main point of the interview, it became clear, had to do with my loyalty. They asked whether in the case of a conflict between my human rights objectives and government policy, I would pursue the human rights objectives. I told them I would not have joined the government had that been my intention; human rights was a serious matter to me and there was nothing I would do to jeopardize the goal of institutionalizing human rights in the bureaucracy. Leakage of information would surely undermine my and my Bureau's efforts and standing. Their questioning, however, revealed that they believed that those committed to human rights were not necessarily trustworthy and their objectives not necessarily compatible with U.S. security interests. They then asked me questions about particular NGOs involved with the Americas of which they were suspicious. I responded by explaining generally NGOs' overall objectives.

On another occasion in 1979, at the time some Paraguayan torturer was admitted to the U.S. by mistake, some workman arrived at my office and took my phone away without anyone in my Bureau knowing about it. It turned up later in the Office of the Under Secretary for Management -- someone dialed my number and got that office. And that same night, two very well dressed and strong looking men appeared at my apartment late at night; when I asked who they were through the peephole, I saw them turn and run down the hall. I also believe my line was tapped and Patt sent a memo to the head of security to stop any harassment and I was not bothered thereafter.

Clearly, coming out of the NGO human rights world and being the liaison with NGOs made me an easy target. When I say NGOs, what we're talking about are not only human rights activists but representatives of the American Bar Association, the National Academy of Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), and other such organizations. I was involved with all of them.

Q: I am trying to figure out what was the human rights element with regard to scientists.

COHEN: Well, scientific organizations began to stand up for the human rights of their professional colleagues in foreign countries when they were arrested or disappeared. Engineers, mathematicians, and even nuclear scientists became involved in human rights activities – by undertaking missions, publishing reports, being part of exchanges. The President of the National Academy of Sciences, for example, became involved with the Andrei Sakharov case in the Soviet Union and debates began over whether American scientists should boycott exchanges with the USSR or instead participate and raise human rights concerns. Some American scientists wanted to bring materials to Soviet scientists who might be denied them; others wanted to champion the cases of scientists who wanted to emigrate to Israel from the Soviet Union but were being denied visas -- the 'refuseniks'.

Many looked to the U.S. government for guidance, but prior to the Carter Administration and even early on in the Carter Administration, U.S. officials were discouraging American scientists from making contacts with their counterparts in the Soviet Union on issues of human rights. They feared that U.S. scientists would be perceived as interfering in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union. Because this was not the message the Carter Administration wanted to convey, I managed to propose and get a change in U.S. policy, which I announced at an AAAS meeting. My statement was published in the *Chemical and Engineering News* and reported on in other major scientific journals. Under the new policy, the U.S. would no longer discourage American scientists from making contacts with their counterparts in the Soviet Union while on exchange programs. At the same time it would not encourage them to do so. If scientists requested information from the State Department on human rights, they would be provided with materials, which they could use if they chose to, and I helped develop such briefing materials.

Q: Again I come back to the fact that the United States at this time was really on a completely different course from any other country. For a country to have a human rights policy was completely contrary to what other government officials were doing. Did you run across any repercussions or support from others than in the American diplomatic community? I mean particularly the states that were our allies…the British, the French, the Germans?

COHEN: Other Western governments, among them Canada, the Nordics and the UK began to hold meetings to discuss the incorporation of human rights in foreign policy. Usually this involved their UN offices but some governments began to appoint special staff to look into promoting human rights in their bilateral relationships as well. The West Europeans for example had to look at the issue of disappearances in Argentina because some of their citizens had disappeared; there was that well-publicized case of the bodies of abducted French nuns washing up on the shore. And there were political exiles from Chile seeking asylum in European countries. The International Commission of Jurists began to organize yearly sessions with Western governments to encourage greater attention to human rights in foreign policy.

At the UN, I got to know the Western Europeans involved with human rights because I was on the U.S. delegation to the Commission on Human Rights and General Assembly and regularly worked with the West Europeans on human rights initiatives. I remember the State Department agreed to my mobilizing a multinational approach to the UN Secretary-General to use his good offices in the Andrei Sakharov case and many Western countries joined in the effort. Quite a number welcomed American leadership on human rights because this had been dormant in previous years and now it was energizing others to support building up human rights institutions in the UN and support resolutions calling for inquiries into the human rights records of different countries.

A few Latin American governments also supported U.S. efforts, although as would be expected Argentina and the Southern Cone were another matter. Uruguay, however, was at times cooperative at the UN. I remember asking the Uruguayan representative if his government would provide a list of political prisoners to the U.S., and the delegate agreed to do so -- that was a first -- and his government also agreed to accept a visit by a representative of the UN Secretary-General to prepare a report on the human rights situation in the country.

One surprise at the UN was the position taken by the head of Iraq's delegation to the UN Commission on Human Rights. He was Iraq's Ambassador to Spain as well as at the Commission. Although the Saddam Hussein government in Iraq was considered one of the world's worst human rights violators, he himself was supportive of human rights and the U.S. human rights policy. He even asked if I would take a picture with him holding up the State Department human rights reports which had come out during the Commission session. I warned him that this was not a good idea, emphasized that I was not just any American official but from the Human Rights Bureau in Washington, was known as a human rights advocate and was also Jewish; I told him he could get into a lot of trouble being photographed with me and the reports. But he persisted. He called over a photographer and asked me to sign his copy of the human rights reports. More significantly at the session, he supported the creation of a working group on disappearances, for which the U.S. was strongly pressing. Even though his own government practiced disappearances, or maybe because of it, he actively helped our delegation in getting the working group set up and in giving it a strong mandate. Without his help, I'm not sure we would have succeeded in attracting as many Third World countries as we did. And because of his role, he was selected as the first chair of the working group on disappearances when it was established. But then the ax fell -- he disappeared.

Q: Have you ever heard from him since?

COHEN: The disappearance occurred after the UN session. The UN immediately tried to find out what happened to him because he was supposed to chair the disappearances working group. The U.S. had to stay quiet because it would have hurt him or been counterproductive. The UN learned that he was withdrawn as Iraq's Ambassador to Spain and recalled to Iraq. I don't believe he was imprisoned but was placed under a kind of house arrest. Much later in the 1990s, I learned that he had managed to get out of Iraq and

was living in Jordan but seeking to go to Canada. But the Canadian government was refusing to extend him asylum. Canada had allowed in an Iraqi a year or two before and the man had turned out to be a terrorist, so the government was refusing to take a chance again. I wrote a long letter to the Canadian government and got others to do so as well, vouching for his credentials and outlining how he had helped the United States and Western countries at the UN Commission on Human Rights. I also got some Canadian lawyers involved, but he was still denied entry. In the end, I don't know what happened because he wasn't in direct touch with me and I didn't think that was a good idea. I always felt a sense of remorse about this case and only hope he learned that the UN body on disappearances he helped set up went on to help so many people and still does.

Q: What about Africa, in particular sub Saharan Africa at that time? I mean they had a chaotic situation. Were we doing much there?

COHEN: Some things. The human rights policy did increase visibility about human rights conditions in sub Saharan Africa above and beyond the apartheid issue. U.S. diplomats raised human rights concerns with a host of African governments, and in a number of places there were some results – the release of prisoners, transitions to civilian rule, such as in Nigeria and Ghana. To be sure, some of the changes were cosmetic but some constituted progress. Most importantly, African governments came to understand that a move toward more democratic rule would entitle them to aid from the United States since development aid was linked to human rights performance. I remember the U.S. provided humanitarian and development aid to Uganda, Equatorial Guinea and the Central African Republic after their dictatorships ended. I also remember meeting with the new leadership of Equatorial Guinea when they visited the State Department and discussing the human rights policy with them. The U.S. also helped strengthen regional machinery in Africa to deal with human rights, for example at the Organization of African Unity (OAU) where a human rights charter was drafted and a regional human rights commission developed.

In southern Africa, U.S. policy toward Rhodesia supported majority rule and its independence, but in the case of South Africa, U.S. support for majority rule was not backed up -- the U.S. relied on private and public diplomacy and an arms embargo but opposed economic restrictions or sanctions to defeat apartheid. U.S. statements at the UN Human Rights Commission seemed to me largely rhetoric. So for Patt's testimony to Congress in 1980, we tried to get clearance for economic sanctions despite the odds and failed but as drafter of the testimony, I did manage to insert in it that "private groups" were calling for a halt to private trade and investment and for corporations to withdraw, and added that it would be useful for Congress to review such recommendations. When that passed muster, we felt a bit of triumph. Charlie Runyon of the Legal Adviser's office, a wonderful human rights stalwart, helped us.

In other instances, U.S. relations with African countries were dominated by the Cold War and seen through a Cold War lens. Some countries were simply battlegrounds between the Soviet Union and the U.S., and the African governments themselves played the game. In Liberia, for example, in 1980, Samuel Doe, a 28-year old master sergeant with a 6th

grade education, led a coup that overthrew the government and brutally murdered the president and his ministers. When Doe met with the U.S. Ambassador, he was lying on a couch and told him that if the U.S. didn't give him arms and political support, he would go to the Soviet Union. It was as blunt as that, and the U.S. agreed to provide him with arms. Although the Ambassador assured us that providing Doe with arms would prevent further killings, I found that argument a hard one to swallow -- arms in order to stop the killing -- but it allowed for a continued U.S.-Liberian relationship, maintained Liberia as an important center for intelligence information, and kept Liberia out of the Soviet sphere. But Doe, you know, went on to destroy his country over the next decade. When he was finally assassinated in 1990, Liberia was overflowing with American arms, and a most destructive civil war followed. By lending our support to Doe, the U.S. kept the country out of the Soviet bloc but we hardly helped to bring Liberians human rights and democracy.

In Zaire (now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo), we tried to distance the U.S. from the Mobutu government, but basically because the country was strategically rich and maintained a strong anti-communist stance, the U. S. supported the government. Mobutu like Doe went on to destroy his country.

Q: What about Indonesia? Suharto was there. There had been the overthrow of Sukarno and the killing of many Chinese and leftists in I think 1965. Now we are moving into the late 70's. How did we view Indonesia?

COHEN: I followed these tragic events when I was representative of the International Federation for Human Rights but I didn't deal with Indonesia during the Carter period. When Carter came into office, Indonesia still had about 30 to 50 thousand political prisoners sitting in jail for more than ten years. Many were on the political left but there were also plenty of prisoners who weren't communists. It was one of Patt Derian's and the Human Rights Bureau's big objectives to get these people out, and I think Patt should be very much credited for doing so. She went there and made a fuss. The Indonesian government itself said it had a plan for releasing the prisoners because it wanted to end the economic and security restrictions against its country. But a gap developed between the government's promises and the time it took to actually release the prisoners. For EA [the East Asian Bureau], the mere indication that there would be releases was sufficient for them to no longer consider Indonesia a violator of human rights and move to restore old ties. Indonesia's 1975 annexation and occupation of East Timor was largely overlooked.

Q: This was also the period of Camp David. How were things playing out in the Middle East?

COHEN: The priority given to the peace process and Camp David essentially ruled out attention to human rights. The Middle East was very much the preserve of the highest echelons of the Department and White House; human rights issues were sidelined. I tried to suggest more balanced statements at the UN Commission on Human Rights but did not

succeed. In fact that is how I met my husband. He was the Director of Israel and Arab-Israeli affairs. We first met arguing over torture of Palestinian prisoners in Israel.

Q: This is David A. Korn, whom I have interviewed.

COHEN: That's right. I made the point that torture was being relied upon much more than was being admitted and that the highest echelons of the Israeli government were aware of it. It really bothered me given my background and I thought we were doing no service to Israel by ignoring its practices. I thought the U.S. should try to influence the Israelis on this point – and possibly there were some intercessions -- but NEA's [Near Eastern Affairs] position was that it was sporadic, not government policy, and that those in the higher ranks were not apprised of it. The controversy over torture played out in part in HA/NEA meetings over what language would be used in the human rights report. The other arena where I felt our positions on Israel's human rights record were unbalanced was at the UN. I actually wrote a memo about it that nobody paid attention to.

Q: You say not balanced, in what regard?

COHEN: Well I felt that we should try to negotiate a resolution on the Middle East that addressed violations on both sides and that the U.S. could vote for. Most if not all of the resolutions introduced were so over the top anti-Israeli that the U.S. had to vote against them. I also wanted the U.S. to give a statement that reflected some acknowledgement of human rights infringements by Israel. Patt tried to get involved here and press for more balance, but it was impossible to accomplish. The Camp David Accords and the Middle East peace process led by the President were regularly cited, and the arguments were always put forward that anything critical would undermine Israel's security and give the impression that the U.S. was encouraging some sort of military action against Israel.

Q: It is like going back to Korea too. It can be a powerful argument but it also can be used to a fare thee well, making it not be able to, making an excuse for harsh government.

COHEN: Patt planned to make a trip to the Middle East; in fact, it was one of her goals to visit Israel and some of the Arab countries after Camp David. I remember Patt told me that we were going to plan a trip to the Middle East and look at our policies in this area in detail. But then Carter lost the election. She felt that U.S. human rights policy had focused to begin with on a particular set of countries that were receiving military and security assistance and committing serious violations against their own populations. The countries of interest to Congress and the NGOs on the human rights side were often in Latin America, East Asia (South Korea, the Philippines), and to some extent Africa (Zaire), places where the U.S. seemed to be the principal government supporter. These countries were often on the front burner. So too was the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe once the Helsinki Process got into swing. But the Middle East (Iran excepted to some extent) was largely avoided.

In the Arab countries, women's issues and certainly civil and political rights in a lot of countries needed looking at but were pretty much off the radar screen. There was always the strategic nature of the Middle East – the oil, the bases. Finally Patt did make a statement about Saudi Arabia, I think it was 1980 that she said something publicly about Saudi Arabia and its policies toward women.

As for Iran, well that's been written about a lot. Let me just say that I found it beyond belief when anyone blamed the human rights policy for the fall of the Shah. Its application was limited and U.S. diplomats were not really allowed to establish any relationships with or meet with the opposition to the Shah. So much so that Patt sent out Steve Cohen (DAS) to get a better reading of what was going on in the country prior to the fall of the Shah. And when the Shah fell and the American hostages were taken, the Department had me call Sadegh Ghotbzadeh [the Information Minister, then Foreign Minister who was executed in 1982]. I knew him from my days at the International League in New York. I used to meet with him -- this was mid to late 1970s -- where he told me about the growing opposition to the Shah and stated quite emphatically that the Shah would soon fall and that the U.S. should know this and know what the opposition stood for and wanted. From my perch in New York, I contacted senior staff in NEA covering Iran at that time but they insisted the Shah was effectively in control, the opposition was exaggerating and told me they wouldn't meet or talk with him or his colleagues. Well at the time of the hostages, they did want to talk to him and asked me to try but at that stage he wouldn't take the call.

Let me emphasize that not wanting to know what was going on in a country and not wanting to acknowledge what you do know was hardly limited to Iran. I had extensive discussions over human rights in El Salvador with ARA, Policy Planning and others in the building pointing out that the Salvadoran junta was moving from centrist to right with the security forces committing most of the human rights violations in the country, which in turn was helping to fuel the civil war. We (HA) wanted the U.S. to use its leverage to bring the forces into line. But the incoming Reagan people -- we were as yet a number of months away -- were hyping up the communist threat to Central America with the result that those inside the government began downright lying about the extent of the human rights abuses by the security forces. They wanted to provide increased security assistance before the Reagan Administration came in, in order to show their anti-communist credentials and their support for 'friends' of the U.S. in Central and South America. I remember sitting up until 11 o'clock at night with ARA staff led by Jim Cheek [DAS, ARA] in order to get into a memo going over to the White House that the security forces were responsible for most of the human rights violations. Bob Jacobs and I succeeded but it was clear that truthfulness about El Salvador had become a political liability for FSOs.

Coming back to Iran, Patt, Henry Precht [director of Iran] and I had to go over to the Hill to brief members of Congress on the treatment of minorities after the fall of the Shah. On Iran, NEA [the bureau of Near Eastern Affairs] was often adversarial with us. I remember earlier when I inquired about how best to protect the Bahais, NEA officials said to me, "don't you know that the Bahais supported the Shah?" And I remember responding, "So did the U.S. government, does that mean we forget about the [American] hostages?" Patt

managed to wangle it so that I spoke first – she wanted to make sure I got the message across about the minorities – Bahais, Jews and others – without interference. NEA on the other hand did not want to alarm members of Congress because NEA had plans for a better relationship with the new government. Well I managed to get the message out without undermining their plans. It's interesting but years later in the 1990s when Precht became director of the World Affairs Council in St. Louis, he invited David to give a speech on the Kurds of Iraq and he also invited me to address audiences on human rights and women's rights. And when introducing me, he pointed out that I was an irritant to him at State years ago but he had come to realize I "was right" to press on human rights, and that he and others had been wrong on that issue. That was quite big of him, I thought.

Q: What about the whole Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. We had pounding away on them as almost free game.

Yes, but not entirely. It evolved. President Carter wrote a letter to Andrei Sakharov when he took office, and Secretary Vance pressed for Soviet Jewish emigration [the Soviet Union allowed out 50,000 Jews] and made a lot of other representations, which I'll get to, but others at State -- mainly proponents of détente, Marshall Shulman for example, didn't want to rile the Soviet Union too much with talk of dissidents and arrests of Helsinki group members. I recall the U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union [Malcolm Toon, 1977-1979] being very cautious about meeting with Soviet dissidents. In fact I brought several together with him in New York privately at the home of an American businessman (Edward Kline) so that they could discuss what steps the embassy might take to help dissidents. The embassy put forward the same sorts of arguments that every other embassy had, and strategic interests in this case were pretty powerful. So we had to do some pressing to get attention to the Soviet cases in our bilateral relationship with the Soviet Union. Quite recently I ran into the director of Soviet affairs from the Carter days [Bill Farrand], and he told me that when his staff heard I was coming down the hall in the 1970s, "they used to alert each other and try to hide." I remember having to initiate a Sakharov Working Group in the Department after Sakharov was exiled to Gorky in early 1980. And I got the Counselor [Roz Ridgway] to chair it and I got support for organizing a multi-national approach to the UN Secretary-General to use his good offices in the Sakharov case. None of this was easy even though we had an adversarial relationship with the Soviet Union.

The Helsinki process helped tremendously, but it's important to note that initially a great deal of attention focused on countries that were the recipients of U.S. aid. Because the U.S. didn't give military or economic assistance to the Soviet bloc, no human rights reports were published on those countries until 1980. In fact those in the incoming Reagan administration argued that the battle against communism was being lost by the Carter administration because we were focusing on our allies instead of the Soviet bloc which was the enemy of the U.S. and in their view the main violators of human rights. In fact they cooked up a theory that communist countries don't change so that more attention should be paid them. Nonetheless, there was one well taken point. Congressional legislation on human rights defined a consistent pattern of gross violations of human rights basically in terms of torture, disappearances and arbitrary executions and

detentions. The legislation didn't define it in terms of an absence of civil and political freedoms. And the legislation called for cut offs of military assistance, economic assistance and police equipment on human rights grounds to countries receiving such aid. The Soviet bloc didn't receive such aid so there were no human rights reports on them.

At some point, members of Congress did begin to notice that there was an oversight and that human rights reports were needed on *all* countries whether or not they received aid from the United States. When reports finally were mandated on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, I was put in charge of overseeing those reports for our Bureau.

The Helsinki process which was parallel to the human rights policy was extremely important and enabled us to bring into the human rights fold human rights conditions in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe. The Helsinki Final Act had been adopted by the United States, Canada, Western Europe and all the countries in Eastern Europe prior to the Carter administration. But it wasn't until the Carter Administration that the Act began to be used to make the case for human rights. It encompassed human dimension or human rights issues as well as security, political and economic issues.

Q: I think the Soviets looked upon this as it defined the borders and all which was very helpful to them. Human rights were just sort of thrown in there. Kissinger didn't care anything about this.

COHEN: Yes that is a good point. The Soviet Union supported the Helsinki accords because it accepted the borders of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. And some in the U.S. questioned whether we should be signing onto those borders. But as it turned out the human dimension basket as it was called, which no one paid attention to, and the human rights provisions turned out to be the undoing of the Soviet Union.

Q: Yes.

COHEN: When the Carter administration came in, the Helsinki accords were just a few years old and review conferences began to be held on human rights. A Congressional-Executive Commission on Security and Cooperation for Europe was established and Patt represented State. Helsinki monitoring groups began forming in Eastern Europe because the Final Act talked about knowing and acting on your rights. These groups began speaking out, as much as they could in those countries, and the U.S. became quite vocal in calling for compliance with the provisions of the Helsinki Final Act. Although the first ambassador to the Helsinki review meeting, Arthur Goldberg was considered too strident, the process later became more professionalized, and it became an excellent vehicle to discuss with and also press the East Europeans on individual cases, minority protection, emigration, freedom of information, religion and so forth. I remember talking with a Romanian diplomat who used to visit HA. Romania tried to show that its foreign policy had some independence from the Soviet Union, which the U.S. encouraged, and it was ready to cooperate in particular over emigration of Jews to Israel (for a price of course).

The Secretary of State made a very large number of demarches to the Soviets. He always had a high interest case to raise, cases that were often put together by our bureau, including family reunification cases. It was a great way to show that the U.S. could promote human rights while at the same time conduct SALT negotiations. Carter made clear that Kissinger's insistence that the U.S. can't promote human rights while furthering strategic interests was no longer U.S. policy. Carter said yes we can have both arms control talks and discussions about human rights. It was important for others in the State Department to see -- that even with our main adversaries, we would raise human rights issues, not just with the Argentinas and Zaires of this world. In fact, the State Department paid a good deal of attention to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe while also addressing human rights in other parts of the world.

Q: I wonder if you could talk about being the new girl on the block in the Human Rights Bureau and the view of women that you encountered. Here you have a bureau that is raising a lot of dust in the corridors of the Department of State. Patt Derian who heads the bureau is a woman; you are a woman. How did you feel as a woman?

COHEN: Well, in HA, there were a number of women officers so I didn't feel outnumbered there, although Patt was on a different plane. She knew the President and was chosen for the job by him, which gave her clout. She also had strong supporters on the Hill, and she married the State Department spokesman, Hodding Carter. So she had lots of gravitas.

Q: You didn't mess with her.

COHEN: You didn't mess with Patt. I mean people certainly did but they had to think twice. She of course had to operate in a man's world, which the State Department was in those days, and she probably had to fight her way into many meetings and deliberations not only because she represented human rights but because she was a woman and one without foreign policy credentials.

As for me, I had no network or support system in the building, not being an FSO. Let me give you a few anecdotal examples that should give you a picture of the situation. I remember going to a big inter agency meeting called by the State Department that brought together officers from different parts of the government. It was on exchange programs with the Soviet Union and East European countries. It was an all-day affair and I was invited to one segment to make a presentation. Well I arrived five or ten minutes early, and all the seats around the conference table were filled as were all the seats around the side of the room. I don't recall any women in the room other than myself and the one unoccupied seat was near the Chair, a senior official from EUR [the European bureau]. So I went to sit there. The next thing I knew the Chair turned to me and said, "Could you get me a few pencils?" I was more than surprised but he pointed to an anteroom nearby, and I thought this should be interesting. So I said, "sure" and went in and found pencils there, and brought some back to him. Then he turned around and asked in a whisper if I could get him some more paper too and I got up and got some and brought it to him. Then a minute or two later, he said, "OK now we are going to hear from Roberta Cohen,

Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, from the Human Rights Bureau. Is she here?" And I raised my hand and said, "That's me." He turned redder than a beet. He had assumed when he saw a woman walk into the room that she was a secretary and I don't mean a secretary of state. No seat had been offered to me. When I went to the only empty one near him it reinforced his view that I was a secretary. I believe he learned something that day or so I hoped.

Another story as well. The Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs was hosting a dinner for his counterpart (and staff) from the Japanese Foreign Ministry and invited Patt to the dinner. It was to be held at the Cosmos Club. The Japanese were in town to discuss U.S. and Japanese policy toward Latin America. Patt called me into her office and said, "I am not going to dinner at a club where women are not allowed to be members, but since we have to be there, Roberta, I want you to go." And then she said as an aside, "I want you to give them a hard time." Well, I didn't know exactly what to do but the ride over helped. You see, first the taxi driver told me that he didn't know whether he could take me to the front door, because women he thought still had to use a side entrance at the Cosmos Club. Then, when I got into the lobby, I was told by the staff that I could not walk up the staircase to the private room because women were not allowed to go up the stairs. So I began to feel indignant myself as I took the elevator to the dinner and began to wonder why such a venue had been chosen. When I entered the room, the Assistant Secretary for Inter-American affairs was at the door together with his counterpart from Japan. They greeted me and without hesitation I said, "Patt Derian, the assistant secretary of state for human rights, regrets not being here. She would have liked to come but chose not to because women are not allowed to be members of the Cosmos Club." Well, it was like throwing a small bomb into the room or at least the entryway. The Assistant Secretary poor man after collecting himself said "we of course could go somewhere else if you prefer." But seeing that the room was set up, elegantly at that and that I had already made my point, I said, not very convincingly, "Well, no, that will be all right, we can stay here." The Japanese official then jumped in to try to make the situation better and said, "You will sit with me" and the Assistant Secretary happily agreed. I was probably going to be seated at the end of the table by the door or something like that but as a result I was seated right next to the guest of honor. I then informed him that in the U.S.-Japan meetings to take place on Latin America, the Human Rights Bureau had not been asked to speak, only to listen. So he said, "I will change that." And he did. So I and others in the Human Rights Bureau were able to speak formally at the meeting on human rights issues. If there is a moral to the story, I guess it's don't mess with women.

There was also a serious case that had to do with my salary. I was supposed to become deputy assistant secretary much earlier than the formal announcement. In fact, I began doing the job well before but I refused to accept the formal designation because the pay offered me was so obviously lower than what should have been earned by a deputy assistant secretary that I felt I had to question it. As a first stop, I canvassed the few other women who were deputy assistant secretaries in the Department -- and found their salaries were lower than male DAS'. One told me she was part of a lawsuit against the State Department and asked if I wanted to join but I didn't. Another said she didn't want to make any waves and did not even want to discuss it because it could hurt her career. A

third said that's how things are, get used to it. In my case, I should mention there was another strike against me – human rights. I had worked for an NGO before coming to the Department and salaries were low at human rights organizations. Although I had been the executive director of the organization, management didn't think I belonged in the same pecking order as foreign policy professionals in the building. Since personnel and management – all men -- were aligned against my getting a higher salary, I decided I would go to Warren Christopher, the Deputy Secretary for a decision. I knew from my work on human rights that he was fair and I felt I had no other recourse. Of course, I knew that Christopher didn't deal with personnel decisions and I was warned by personnel and management against doing so; one senior officer even told me he was prepared "to kick my ass" out of the building if I went to the Deputy Secretary. But I decided to risk it. And Christopher agreed to see me despite his workload. He had the head of management [Benjamin Read, Under Secretary of State for Management] sit on one side of the table, and I sat on the other. Management presented all its facts and figures on why the salary decided for me was the appropriate one. And I explained why it was unfair and discriminatory. And management rebutted my views and I rebutted theirs and finally Christopher said to the head of management, "I want Roberta paid the same amount as the majority of the other DAS' in this building and immediately." I'll never forget those words, I felt justice was being done and I was so admiring of Christopher's being ready to support my case against his senior management. But management didn't implement the decision. Right after the meeting, the head of management decided to request an opinion from the Office of Personnel and Management (OPM), an overall government office. Well, that took a good deal of time, both requesting an opinion and getting a response. Meanwhile, I continued doing the job of DAS without the formal title or the pay. When OPM responded, it was quite revealing. OPM said that there was no need for its opinion; the State Department could decide this itself. But again management did not move to implement Christopher's decision so I had to go back to Christopher's office. They didn't know the decision had not been implemented and Christopher apparently laid down the law, so finally I formally became DAS and was given a fair salary. Discrimination against women and against human rights as a profession was alive and well in the building.

Q: Oh boy. Let us move to your next stop.

COHEN: To Ethiopia. I was off to Ethiopia to accompany my husband David [David A. Korn] who was appointed Chief of Mission or Permanent Charge d'Affaires.

Q: He served from when to when?

COHEN: 1982 to 1985.

Q: Who was the last Ambassador?

COHEN: Frederic Chapin. The Ethiopian government expelled him in 1980.

Q: Did David have any connections to Ethiopia or the Horn of Africa or Africa at all?

COHEN: No he didn't but he had experience with Ethiopia's 'neighbors,' namely Somalia, Sudan and Egypt given his Middle East background. The position was actually a fall back one for him. David had been asked to be Ambassador to Mauritania where he had served earlier, and we were waiting to go there, but the government failed to give him agrément because it mixed him up with another David Korn who was Jewish, heavily involved with Soviet Jewish affairs and had joined the Department as an adviser to Haig [Secretary of State Alexander Haig]. Through the intercept of a cable, the U.S. learned that Saudi Arabia had advised Mauritania not to accept David Korn for these reasons. The Assistant Secretary for African Affairs Chester Crocker tried to straighten it out, but the government sought to save face and held fast, now saying it objected to the fact that my husband had served as head of the political section in Israel and then as Director of Israel and Arab-Israeli affairs and spoke Hebrew. Well, the U.S. was in no rush after this to send an Ambassador to Mauritania.

David was told he could wait another year or so for the next round of ambassadorial appointments but had had enough of shuttling between temporary assignments. When he learned that Ethiopia was coming open, he chose to go there as Charge/Chief of Mission rather than waste another year. The politics were interesting and the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa was also the seat of the Organization of African Unity and the UN Economic Commission for Africa, so the job offered considerable scope. As for me, I was glad to get out of town because the incoming Reagan Administration was busy trying to dismantle the human rights bureau and upend the policy and I was being called by alarmed staff in the office and also asked to speak and write but I was afraid that doing so could harm David's prospects. The Reagan people were punishing Foreign Service staff associated with the human rights policy, and now David was married to one. Ethiopia sounded an interesting place to head off for.

Q: How would you describe the situation in Ethiopia when you went out there?

COHEN: Emperor Haile Selassie had been overthrown in 1974 and Mengistu Haile Mariam had turned the country into a Soviet satellite. There was a politburo and a workers' party modeled after the Communist party of the U.S.S.R. The official ideology was Marxism-Leninism and a statue of Lenin and huge posters of Marx, Lenin and Engels adorned the main square. Freedom of expression was controlled, the media was hostile to the United States, and across the street from the American Embassy was a camera booth to photograph everyone going in and out. Ethiopians as a result were afraid to come to the embassy unless they had specific business that was pre-approved. We ourselves were watched, the phones were tapped, so we had to be careful of what we said. Even at the compound, in our living quarters, the Ethiopian staff were expected to watch us and report. The servants at the residence collected every piece of paper we threw away (one Sunday when they were off duty I found many letters I received and other scraps of paper hidden in kitchen cabinets presumably to be brought to Ethiopian security for review).

As far as Embassy programs went, the U.S. had terminated its economic aid program in 1979, and stopped arms sales even earlier -- the Carter Administration had done this on human rights grounds. Ethiopia ordered the closure of the US' Kagnew military communications station, insisted on reductions in U.S. Embassy staff and expelled the USIA [U.S. Information Agency] program which had been firebombed in 1977. So relations were chilly to say the least. Before we went out, we were told that Ethiopians would not easily come to the residence, they would be afraid, and there would not be too many official or social contacts.

Q: Here you are a human rights person. Were we doing anything or just observing?

COHEN: Initially observing which led to doing something. Let me start with Revolution Day in Red Square in 1982, not that long after we arrived. David was back in DC on consultations, so I went with the DCM to hear Mengistu Haile Mariam, the head of state give his three hour speech. The first part was on domestic issues and Marxist ideology, the second part on foreign policy and it was a blistering attack on the United States. He blamed the U.S. for just about every ill that happened to Ethiopia, and at the end tried to whip up the crowds against the United States. I then had to go down into the crowds from the grandstand, where there were thousands, if not tens of thousands of people in the square. I was scared, I must say, as I headed for the big black American Cadillac flying the American flag, but people all around started yelling, "Viva America," and waving to me. And as we got into the car and it inched through the crowd, everybody was knocking on the window, smiling, and yelling, "Viva America." So it became clear that there was a great reservoir of pro-American feeling in the country, that people were ready to take some risks, and that the regime's control apparatus wasn't so absolute.

Out of this was born a public affairs program. When David saw that there was no one at the embassy to circulate the wireless file, which carried news stories and articles about the U.S. of interest to Ethiopian government ministries as well as African organizations and embassies, he cabled to Washington and got approval for a part time position for a local American to identify the articles and send out material to the ministries, and to the African embassies (more than 30) and organizations (like the Organization of African Unity, the UN Economic Commission for Africa and so forth). It just happened that I was the only one available for the job.

I was fascinated because as I saw it, the U.S. was essentially in the middle of an information and political war with the Soviet Union and should have every reason to play up its news especially as there were a lot of disenchanted people with communist rule. But it was not an easy road to hoe. At the NSC [National Security Council] and USIA, there was a lot of anger against Ethiopia and desire to punish it for "turning" to the Soviet Union. No distinction was made between the Ethiopian people and the ideologues running the place. It didn't occur to them that Ethiopia should be treated like a bloc country. Well my experience at Revolution Square told me something different and I began developing distribution lists and expanding the information base in order to gain entry on the Ethiopian side. By the time I left, I developed a full-fledged USIA public affairs program, which Congress approved, and USIA gave me an award, and assigned

one of their senior officers to replace me. And I was asked to overlap with him which really flattered me because I didn't know anything about USIA.

When I first began, I cabled USIA for books and films, but they would write back and say they didn't have a program in Ethiopia so they couldn't send me anything, and I would cable back and explain why it was important to have one and mention that there were Ethiopians, some connected to the government, who in some cases were taking risks by requesting U.S. materials. So little by little they began sending things and some of the USIA people came out, and I began reporting to them, and then they took over my efficiency reports, the State Department paid me and I used leftover USAID local staff. So a small operation developed. I remember a USAID official who knew me in the Carter period dubbed it "a typical Roberta Cohen operation." David of course had to win the support of the NSC and State for a program in Ethiopia and also for his wife doing it. He had to answer questions about the politics of the situation and also about nepotism, about the chief of mission's wife working – this was a sensitive issue in 1982.

While everyone agreed to a program at the OAU and the UNECA (the programs here had been shut off inadvertently when USIA left), agreeing to programs with "communists" was another matter. There was also the problem of how to make contacts with Ethiopians in the Information Ministry, at the university, at film institutes. So, for starters, I decided to enroll at the university -- Addis Ababa University (AAU), built with U.S. funds. It was a hot bed of Marxist-Leninist thought, although the library remained the John F. Kennedy Library and the bust of Kennedy was still there, next to a big poster of Lenin. Enrolling was not an easy thing to do because they didn't want me there. I asked to audit a course so that I would learn about Africa, I said I would pay. It all created a political stir.

Q: What was the course?

COHEN: International Relations in Africa in the political science department. Although I was initially brushed off, I kept coming back and asking why they don't want to help me learn about Africa? So finally they said, you can audit the course but you cannot be listed as taking the course, and we will accept no money. So I began to audit the class and the professor told me that "even though you are not listed as being here, you will give a talk to the class like all the other students but you don't have to take the exam." I went every week to class – it was at night – and the students studiously avoided talking to me. In fact no one acknowledged my being there – everyone averted their eyes as if I weren't there, which was amusing because I was the only non-Ethiopian person in the room, one of the few women, an American from the embassy to boot and the wife of the chief of mission! On occasion I raised my hand in class and said something. And I was also assigned a topic to present to the class – apartheid and the Bantustans in South Africa. I think the class thought I was going to defend racism in South Africa because of the Reagan Administration's constructive engagement policy. But I didn't by a long shot and the professor let me speak longer than other students. A few times, he invited me to have coffee and I discovered that he didn't have a Master's degree and very badly wanted one, but there were no graduate programs at AAU. I saw he was real smart and managed to deal effectively with the ideologues in the class who would speak up to try to test his

loyalty to Marxism. One day when we had coffee I asked him, "Have you ever heard of the Fulbright program in the U.S.?" He was more than interested and to make a long story short, I got him a Fulbright and he went to the United States where he got two M.A.s and then returned to the university in Addis.

Q: Was that program still in operation while you were there?

COHEN: No. There was no longer any official USIA program in Ethiopia, but the USIA Fulbright officer in Washington didn't seem to know that. He just thought the embassy hadn't nominated anyone for a while. So I put forward a candidate. And the office processed it. But getting him out of Ethiopia was a problem because he needed an exit visa and approval by the university, and the Ethiopians in charge (department heads, deans) said, "We should be the ones to select." They wanted to send one of their ideologues. So I went to see the President of the University, who was a figure head and pro-American and basically supportive of the Fulbright program. But I discovered that the obstacle was the Vice President, the real power behind the throne – who was the ideologue and wanted to do the selecting. Well, I basically told him, "If you turn down my candidate, you won't get another chance" and because he realized that Fulbrights might be something the university might want in future, he agreed. And I said, "Next year we can consider the candidates you put forward, but the U.S. of course will decide."

During this time, I began to meet some academics at the university and I learned that some hoped the U.S. would give Fulbrights to the ideologues in order to get rid of them whereas others did not want such people rewarded which I agreed with. Soon I began to wonder how I could get some of these academics over to the embassy and came upon the idea of movies – U.S. feature films, which everyone liked but were no longer shown in Addis. Why not show a movie at the residence, I thought, which could seat about 150 people or more when you cleared out all the furniture? The residence was a palace the Haile Selassie family had donated to the U.S., and since the U.S. no longer had a cultural center in Addis, it seemed the next best thing. So we began sending out invitations to movies, plus desserts, like chocolate cakes -- rare in Addis -- and coffee before the movie so people could mill around, and before the film was shown I always said a few words to try to get a social message across. Of course many Ethiopians were afraid to come to the embassy because of the security camera across the street, and spies in the crowd, but coming in groups to a movie seemed like something they could risk. And so they began to come little by little and before we knew it more than 100 people were coming to the American embassy residence for the movies every month. I also went over to the medical school and invited doctors, and further found a lot of interested Ethiopians at the independent Rotary and Lion's Clubs where whoever was left of the business community congregated. And there were Ethiopians working at the ECA and OAU.

Reaching government people was more difficult, I don't mean just for the movies but for education and information programs I was trying to develop. But then I came to realize that the deputy minister of information was somebody I knew. I had met him at graduate school. I remembered him because I had never met 'a revolutionary' before and …

Q: At SAIS?

COHEN: Well actually he was studying at the University of Chicago but visited SAIS. And he and I had long talks which fascinated me so I remembered him. I soon found out that he was one of the people who supported the revolution that overthrew the Emperor. He was a political scientist and communications person, became director of radio and television for the revolution and when we arrived in Addis was number two at the information ministry. I wasn't so sure he would remember me because our conversations were twenty years ago but I sent a message to him indirectly through the director of the German cultural center (the Goethe Institute). The director informed me he did remember me, and the Director then invited my husband and me to dinner – we went in an unofficial car -- and he arranged for the deputy minister to drop by later in the evening. So we reconnected.

When I told him I was now the public affairs officer at the American Embassy and would like to meet with people at the Ministry, he said he would help me. And he did. Let me note that by this time he was disenchanted with the revolution and must have seen the contact as an opportunity to meet with Americans. He invited me over to the Ministry, which for USIA was an event. I asked him for a friendlier media both for me personally and for the U.S. I told him that I had been part of a group of volunteers helping out at the leprosy center and a group picture was taken and put in the *Ethiopian Herald* [the English language daily]. But that one face in that group had been cut out, and that was mine. That amused him and he said, "You know Henry Kissinger once said, even the paranoid have enemies." I said, "Well I would like to be able to have American events and donations in the newspaper." Not that I had any donations from USIA to give at that time, so I called upon all my friends in the States to send me books. And they did, and I had cartons of books. They were old books. They were books about anything. And I went over to Addis Ababa University library and said, "I have all these books and would like to make a donation." The librarians who looked at them said, "We are happy to have them, but it is not the kind of donation that gets publicized because they are not new books, or books focused on a particular theme, they are just any old thing." I said, "Well, let's do it anyway because if I can show the U.S. that the donation is acknowledged by this country, then maybe I can get you the real books you want." They went along with it, they wanted connections to Americans, and the Ministry of Information backed it up and said "The donation is going to be covered." And so it was in the *Ethiopian Herald* and possibly on the radio. My picture was there, the books were there, everything was there. And that played well in Washington – it had been years since the U.S. was mentioned in the newspapers in a positive way. Then officials from other ministries, the Ministry of Culture, and the film center came to see me and find out whether the U.S. had any films to give them; the mass media education center had come earlier. And the Minister of Information himself went to see my husband and told him he was sick of watching the Soviet Union fight World War II on the eastern front every Saturday night. They wanted American films. So suddenly we had demand, but we didn't have supply.

I had to press and press and finally got films and books and then I asked for short-term visitor grants for officials in government ministries to visit the U.S. In particular, I

wanted the radio director to go to the U.S. and the television director. Neither had been to the U.S. and I believed their veneer of indoctrination was probably thin. But USIA responded that Ethiopia would never let such people out but I argued that I could get them out and so they agreed. Of course, I was walking a tightrope. At the very last minute, the TV Director called me to tell me the Minister said he could not go, although everything had been set up. With the help of the deputy minister I got in to see the Minister. And I told him, "I have to explain to you that if you turn this down we are not going to be able to do more things because Washington was sure you wouldn't let the director come to begin with and I assured them he could go. Canceling will not be well received and will end everything I am working for." He said, "You really want him to go?" and I said, "yes," and he replied, "OK he can go," and then he asked for sports films to show on TV that same week. When it came time for the radio director to go, the same charade took place. This time, however, the minister told the director to tell me -- after nixing the visit -- that I should not come in to try to reverse the decision. So David said no one said he couldn't go in, so he went and the radio director was then allowed to go.

Meanwhile the State Department's director general began checking into whether David's wife should be doing this program now that it was becoming more high profile. And USIA wondered about the program being run by someone who knew nothing about the agency or its operations. On one occasion, I showed the film, "The Grapes of Wrath" at the University and over a thousand people came, which I conveyed to Washington. Well, I didn't know I wasn't allowed to do that, and got a frantic call from USIA. What they actually said after telling me it was against the rules was, "keep doing what you're doing, but don't tell us about it for heaven's sake." Now if in 1982 and 1983 most of the films on Ethiopian television were East German or Soviet, by 1984 most of the films on television were American. And American donations to the medical school and university and other places began to be reported in the press and over the radio. And at the same time, we were continuing to have the movie shows, got musicians from USIA to come out and they performed at the large Italian cultural center, and I was even asked to speak at the commencement ceremonies at the Neil Armstrong Typing School (whose name had somehow been maintained) and for whom I got typing books. By the time the U.S. began to give food donations to Ethiopia during the famine, the media was already giving the U.S. some coverage.

Well, Washington liked what I was doing and USIA gave me its Superior Honor Award and offered me a job when I left Ethiopia.

Q: Well did you get any feel about Mengistu and his immediate circle? Did he pay any attention to this?

COHEN: Well one day someone from one of his circle came to my office. It was somebody who worked in one of his inner councils.

Q: This was the Derg?

COHEN: Yes, within the Derg offices. The one who came to see me was someone middle or senior level in Mengistu's office. He had heard about the Fulbright scholarships and wanted to go to the States on one, he said. The scholarship he was interested in was a short term one for senior officials. At first I thought he might be a plant checking out our programs -- we got some of those -- but he was so visibly terrified about being there -- and you can't fake that -- that I believed he really was interested in going to the U.S. and was taking a chance by coming in. I therefore assured him that I would never reveal his name, but pointed out that his government would know he was at the embassy because of the camera across the street. He said he could explain why he had come to the embassy. So I went over the program with him, told him what he would have to do to apply, but informed him that ultimately the Ethiopian government would have to approve a visa for him. He said he would fill out the forms but he never came back. I believe he was just too frightened or he came up against opposition.

I was pleased however that he had heard about the program and was interested in it. I had made such a big effort to get the word out that the U.S. was there. You couldn't have more than 100 people coming every month to the American embassy for films from different parts of society -- the university, the medical community, the business community, some government officials, including from the information ministry and media, and not know something was going on. That's probably how a rumor developed that I was the CIA station chief. The Swiss Ambassador and his wife were persuaded I was with intelligence at the embassy – and indicated that to me in an unfriendly way. And at a cultural event I organized at the Italian cultural center, a Russian from the Soviet Embassy introduced himself (the first Russian official I met there) and asked if he could come over to see me about the programs I ran. I replied that I would be pleased to talk with him, but never heard from him again. I also was told by an Ethiopian professor at the university that one of the heads of security would like to see me. Here I drew the line and said that my work involved educational and cultural programs, not security issues. The Ethiopian professor responded that the head of security was an intellectual, had his doctorate and wanted to discuss different subjects with me. I responded that if they would release one of the guards at the American Embassy who had been arrested, I might consider talking to him. The guard was an old man who always greeted me sweetly; there was probably no reason whatsoever for him to be in prison except to harass the American Embassy, which they regularly did. Not that long thereafter the guard was released, but I never accepted to meet with the security official.

I also deliberately steered my program away from the CIA at the embassy which wanted to use some of my contacts since they saw I had more access to Ethiopians than almost anybody else at the embassy. In fact, the station chief wanted me to help set up the number two at the information ministry, my major contact, which I not only refused to do but made clear that there would be no way that the CIA operation and mine would work together. The public affairs program could only succeed and attract Ethiopians if it maintained a non-political profile and even so, some still thought I was with U.S. intelligence. But above all, setting up a senior official in a place so closely guarded by Ethiopian and East German security could expose him to possible arrest and torture. I wouldn't do that to anyone, much less a friend of mine and one helping our Embassy

with the public affairs program. In fact I was so appalled I remember threatening the station chief. I walked right up to him in his office and told him that "if you touch him, I will personally do you bodily harm." I think he was a little shocked and so was I. I had never threatened anyone in my life before and honestly I didn't know what I would do if he pursued his plan, but he didn't, probably because of who my husband was but sometimes I like to think it was because I stunned or shamed him. I should mention that the entire CIA operation was not that long thereafter expelled from Ethiopia after one of its officers was arrested and held in prison for more than a month. When the officer was interrogated by the Ethiopians, he told us upon release that he was asked whether I was the station chief. He assured them I was "not part of the operation." He went on to give the names of all those who were part of the operation and they were all expelled. He also apparently identified the Ethiopians the station had worked with and they were all arrested, tortured and some killed. When a senior CIA staff member came out to investigate the debacle, I met with him to get the assurance that their program would have nothing to do with mine. [For the story of the failed CIA operation, see the book, *The Disappearance of Harry Davis*, by TN Davey published in 2009. TN Davey is a pen name David used.]

Q: I take it the news in the country was all very controlled.

COHEN: Yes.

Q: Were you able to make any headway there?

COHEN: Well, as I mentioned, the U.S. began to be cited in the *Ethiopian Herald* for book donations and also began to be cited for wireless file stories I circulated on subjects that were scientific, educational, agricultural, and cultural. It would say United States Information Service as the source – a big change in the paper. And American films began showing on Ethiopian television. As I said, the majority of films shown in 1984 were American.

Q: When you say films, what do you mean?

COHEN: Documentaries, educational films, sports films (American basketball, football), and also feature films. "The Grapes of Wrath" was shown on television -- Ethiopia was going through a drought and famine and here was a film about the American dustbowl and the famine. The problem was that there were a lot of restrictions on showing feature films on television, so I found a company in London that had no such restrictions and we got American feature films from them to show on TV in Ethiopia.

Q: How about feature films at the downtown theaters? Did they get there?

COHEN: Not allowed, but they didn't have the kind of downtown theaters I think you're thinking of. But Ethiopians could see U.S. films at places organized by their own educational mass media, on television (of course not many had TVs), at the university and of course there were those invited to the U.S. Residence, and Ethiopians were

welcome at the marine's 'bull dog' den on the embassy compound where films were shown.

Q: Let's talk more about the University. Were they teaching this Marxist philosophy, was it almost a rabid place or could one go in there and be an American without having problems?

COHEN: Well I had problems in trying to audit a course but in the end they decided I could take the class. I don't believe there were any other American students at the university besides myself but I successfully negotiated with the university to bring in an American lecturer on a Fulbright program. The university even cost shared with us: they gave him room and board. Then I developed a program where more American faculty would come, maybe four or five. Workers' Party people among the students were watching and informing on teachers and on students. And there were restrictions on what they could talk about. One professor wrote a book about a man-made famine years ago to draw attention to what was happening in Ethiopia then. The book showed that an enveloping famine earlier on was largely the result of government policies. Others at the university, who had been to the States years before, were pro-American in sentiment. And then there were the ideologues, the died-in-the-wool Marxists who presumably taught in that fashion. That wasn't the case in the class I audited although the professor had to be careful. Still others were opportunistic. When the Olympics were held in the U.S. in 1984, and Ethiopia followed the Soviet Union in boycotting them, the Vice President of the university, their top ideologue still wanted Olympic posters I could give him. In some ways, the university was a microcosm of Ethiopia more broadly. There were those who wanted to reinstate greater access and ties to the West and its ideas and there were ideologues who rejected the United States but sometimes not wholeheartedly and then there were many who blew with the wind to survive.

Q: When I was in Yugoslavia, and this was back in the 60's, there was a tremendous exodus of [African] students mainly from Bulgaria who were just fed up with being called black monkeys. This was a very unhappy group. I understand there were several complaints from the group. I think Haile Selassie had a project and sent so many to the U.S., so many to the Soviet Union. Those who went to the Soviet Union thought they were getting shortchanged. Did you see any reflection of that?

COHEN: Well, part of the enthusiasm for going to the United States in the mid-1980s on whatever grants or visas they could was because many of the Ethiopians were sick of the Soviet Union and other East European countries where they were sent for education and training programs. Many of the intellectuals, academics, playwrights, and artists in the country were sent to the Soviet Union and the bloc countries for exchanges, tours, some for degrees. Many of the ones I talked to complained although I never heard complaints about racism from them. In the case of dictator Mengistu, however, he had been to the States and had reportedly been involved in a racial incident and it was rumored that it accounted for some of his hostility toward the U.S. The irony, however, was that a lot of the Ethiopians who went to the Soviet Union became pro-American whereas a lot of the

ones who studied in the United States during the time of the Emperor became revolutionaries and part of the movement to overthrow him.

Q: I can understand that. It was something like the feeling sort of tongue in cheek that we should send more Africans to Lumumba University [in the Soviet Union]. It did more for the cause during the 60's and 70's. We were sort of in the middle of a revolution, an American style one which was not very bloody.

COHEN: Well, in Ethiopia, when I arrived it was about ten years into their revolution, and people were disillusioned and dissatisfied and angry with it, so the jokes around Addis were all anti-communist, anti-government. A popular joke was about a child in a school who was asked who his mother was – the answer was Russia; then he was asked who his father was, and the answer was Marx or Lenin; then the child was asked, what he wanted to be when he grew up, and the answer was 'an orphan.' These kinds of jokes and there were a lot of them reflected a growing sentiment. It was clear as I mentioned earlier that the time was ripe for a public affairs program in Ethiopia and that the U.S. could make some inroads, although the Reagan Administration resisted doing so at first. It took them a while to understand. In fact, we had as tough a fight with Washington on this one as we did on the Ethiopian side to get these programs up and running.

In addition to the public affairs program, the other breakthrough, a much bigger one was what David dealt with -- the famine and the drought. There was a full-blown famine developing in the country, an essentially man-made famine and people were dying. They needed American food. The Russians couldn't provide that. But initially the Reagan administration refused to give food to Ethiopia. They knew there was famine and drought in '82 and '83 and they cut down the program. There was a small Catholic Relief Services program that was reduced. Later they were embarrassed by the fact that the U.S. had no program when hundreds of thousands of people were starving and their pictures were on the front page of major newspapers. David actually helped get those newspaper stories out. And the U.S. came through in a big way in 1984 with food under the slogan "hunger knows no politics." 1984 was an election year and Reagan decided we were going to be on the right side of this and give food aid. And with the food came all the delegations, countless Congressional delegations, the media, everybody was arriving in Ethiopia. Another potential opportunity for opening up the country.

Q: How about the local staff, the Ethiopians. It must have been a difficult time for them as well.

COHEN: Very difficult. Ethiopians at the Embassy could be arrested and tortured if they did not agree to inform on the Americans or if they were seen to be helping the Americans. David's bodyguard Hailu was arrested and he told David that he would not have been released had he not agreed to inform. For that show of integrity, David made sure his back salary was paid and put him into another position at the Embassy. David wanted everyone to know that the United States was behind the people who worked for our government. Then there was the terrible case of Mr. Simatos, a senior Ethiopian administrative officer at the Embassy who accompanied a Congressional delegation to

Gondar where food was being delivered by the U.S. Well, Mengistu's henchman up in that region, Melaku [Major Melaku Tefera] had Simatos taken out of an official dinner hosted by provincial officials for the visiting Americans. They told him, "we want to talk with you," and they took him to a field and beat him up and knocked his teeth out. The Embassy sent him to Germany for medical treatment at an Army base, and David made sure he got a bonus.

As for the public affairs program, I had three Ethiopians working for me at the embassy and a driver who disseminated all kinds of materials around town for the program. I never talked politics with them, because I understood that they might have to inform. I also wanted to protect them and make sure there was no part of the program that could compromise them, and that was another reason I did not want to have any relationship to the CIA. Perhaps the program served as a kind of safety valve for the Ethiopians. There was a lot of discontent developing with the Mengistu regime. Maybe being able to partake of U.S. movies and programs helped tamp down some of the discontent within their own ranks. I am just speculating, because sometimes I wondered why they didn't shut us down. I am sure the Deputy Minister of Information had something to do with that. In fact, when I occasionally had lunch with him, informers would seat themselves at the table next to ours in the restaurant to listen to our conversation, but he just looked amused. I arranged for him to go on one of my senior Fulbright grants to the U.S. and in the end, we got him and his family political asylum.

Q: Did you run across overt hostility on the part of the Soviets or the East Germans and the Czechs or anything? Were they trying to block you out?

COHEN: Of course, they were trying to block us out. The East Germans were behind the security services, which tapped our lines, followed us around. Their presence was indirect but heavy. When it came to U.S. food aid, I recall the Soviet bloc objected to having too much newspaper attention to American donations. So the Ethiopians reported only the American food that went to the government, which was a small part of U.S. aid -- most of it went through private organizations and this wasn't put in the papers, which made it look like the Russians were giving more than the Americans. But it was the Americans who had become the largest food aid donor to Ethiopia in 1984.

One day, a Polish academic who said he taught "human rights" at the University came to my office. I put up a big Solidarity poster on the wall behind my desk that USIA had sent me. He came in to talk about issues like democracy and human rights, he said, but was obviously a plant, and in the course of his comments he told me he thought the Ethiopians were uncivilized, and that Africans were uncivilized and asked if I didn't find that too. I replied that I thought the most uncivilized people in the world were those in his part of the world who murdered the Jewish people. He was a little stunned by my answer. I don't know what his objective was and who sent him. He was obviously trying to see who I was and maybe catch me up in saying something he could use against me.

Q: Speaking of Jews, was the Falasha exodus going on while you were there?

COHEN: Yes, but that was David's domain. I don't know if that is in his oral history.

Q: I am sure it is, but is that something you were aware of?

COHEN: I was aware of the Jewish movement in the U.S. on behalf of the Falashas as well as Israel's interest to get the Falashas out of Ethiopia. People I knew from Jewish organizations in the States came out to Addis and also talked to me in Washington. And of course I was aware that in the Falasha area, that is Gondar, Mengistu's person in charge was exceptionally cruel and brutal. That was the Melaku I mentioned before -- he was notorious for persecuting, jailing and torturing Falashas. And he was rabidly anti-American. [After the regime fell, Melaku was convicted of genocide and sentenced to death.] So the Falashas by this magic carpet operation were able to go to the Sudan and Europe and then to Israel. When back in DC, David was invited to a big public meeting of Jewish organizations where he was asked to stand up and everyone loudly applauded him and I had to stand up with him.

And yet, I was sorry that Jews had to leave Ethiopia because part of the heritage of Ethiopia is both Jewish and Christian. You can see on the walls of Ethiopian palaces Jewish stars and crosses linked together. There were also Ethiopian crosses with Stars of David inside them. It was a beautiful merger of Christianity and Judaism. Church services were a combination of Old and New Testament traditions. And I remember some conversations with Ethiopian intellectuals about this -- they regretted the Falashas were leaving because the Falashas were their heritage too. They had lived in Ethiopia for 2,000 years. But everyone was aware they were being treated horrifically, and there was famine and drought affecting their area, and that Melaku was in charge there.

Q: Coming back to the public affairs program, were other embassies giving opportunities to the Ethiopians?

COHEN: Oh yes, the embassy that was closest to the Ethiopians was the Italian Embassy. It had a big cultural center, its programs had never been kicked out, and it occupied a special almost 'neutral' position in Ethiopia. It was the only Western country the Derg might talk to and it positioned itself between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Remember Italy had a big communist party. The Italians were invited to the Soviet Embassy for dinners or receptions; the U.S. never was. Italy could bring Ethiopians to study in their country without problem, and their cultural officer mixed freely with Ethiopians, and Ethiopians weren't at all afraid to be seen at the Italian cultural center or embassy. By contrast, the U.S. was the enemy of the Ethiopian revolution and the super power squaring off against the Soviet Union. Formerly Ethiopia's ally under the Emperor, the U.S. was now arming Somalia, while Ethiopia was trying to destabilize Sudan and Somalia.

As for the other Western countries with programs, Germany had the Goethe Institute and the British too played a significant role: they conducted cultural and educational programs and there was still a British school. Some of the British academics and writers who came out for visits were sympathetic to the Ethiopian revolution, seeing it as

something socialist and progressive. At least one of the British academics who visited was called a 'fellow traveler' by my friend at the Ministry of Information when he spoke to me privately. And visitors like Germaine Greer saw the Ethiopian revolution as something socialist and progressive no matter the reality. She and I had a debate in the British magazine *Index on Censorship*.

But when it came to education, scholarships and food aid, the U.S. topped the list, as far as I could see, as to where Ethiopians wanted to go. That was because of the dominant role played by the U.S. in Ethiopia prior to the revolution (Peace Corps, USAID programs, USIA programs), English being the 'official' language, and because there was growing anti-communism. The Cold War was playing out in Ethiopia, but not between the Soviets and the British or the Soviets and the Italians but between the Soviets and the United States.

Q: Were you getting people demonstrating against the United States?

COHEN: Oh never. When we left Addis in 1985, many, many hundreds – some even said a thousand -- came on July 4, to say goodbye. It was a demonstration in support of the United States. They lined up in the middle of the night despite curfews to bring us gifts and say goodbye. And I was invited to speak at the Rotary Club and the Lion's Club (and got standing ovations), and give the keynote at the International School commencement, where a good part of the student body was Ethiopian, and at the Neil Armstrong typing school graduation – where there was a huge working class audience.

When USIA gave me their award, they told me that the organization couldn't itself have reopened the public affairs program because it didn't believe it was possible and also, because USIA would have been bogged down by all its rules and regulations whereas I was largely on my own and able to develop an independent vision and act on opportunities as they arose whether or not they were in the book of rules. Of course I had the head of the Embassy's full support, without which I couldn't have moved. It was the most exciting experience I had in my professional life and also the riskiest, not for me but for the people I interacted with. The program became a magnet at the embassy for Ethiopians who wanted ties with the U.S. and changed the way the U.S. approached the country. The award – I have it here, said: "For outstanding achievement in developing with minimal resources a highly successful public affairs program which has facilitated Embassy access to the highest levels of the Ethiopian society and paved the way for the reestablishment of an official USIS presence in Ethiopia."

Q: When you left in '85 did you have any feel about whither Ethiopia? Did you feel that the Mengistu regime was sort of running out of steam or not?

COHEN: We saw that there was a lot of dissatisfaction with the regime. And civil wars were raging in the north and other parts of the country. There was famine and drought, and certainly not a sustainable government but when exactly it would come down wasn't clear. David wrote the book, *Ethiopia, The United States and the Soviet Union*, after we left. [Croom Helm, 1985-86]. We heard that it was smuggled into the Ethiopian high

command and was being passed around like *samizdat* literature, and some say Mengistu read it. From my narrower focus, I found that despite the repression and cruelty of the regime, it was remarkably easy to subvert it in different ways because support for the regime was thin and growing thinner. And when the West had to come in to bail the country out of the famine and drought, it looked like the beginning of the end, because Ethiopian people saw that the regime could not feed or sustain its population. They saw that the government was not viable, the economy was in terrible straits, and there were all these restrictions on private enterprise which hurt economically and there were limits on movement, expression and on political freedoms. So it wasn't so much whether this regime would come to an end but when. Some thought Mengistu would commit suicide rather than flee, like the Ethiopian Emperor Téwodros or like Hitler. But instead he fled by his helicopter for Nairobi and then on to exile in Zimbabwe. [The Mengistu regime ended in 1991, five to six years later and after the fall of the Soviet Union.]

Q: Well you left there in 1985. Whither? What did you do?

COHEN: We went to London for a year to be at Chatham House, where David wrote his book on Ethiopia and I became Honorary Secretary of the Parliamentary Human Rights Group (PHRG). When I arrived in London, Martin Ennals the Secretary-General of Amnesty International introduced me to Eric Avebury, a British lord who headed a multi-party group in the British Parliament working on human rights. I worked with Lord Avebury the chair of the group and sometimes with its two other officers -- MPs from the Labor and Conservative parties, Alf Dubs and The Right Honorable Sir Bernard Braine. I must say I had trouble with all the titles -- the honorables and right honorables, and when it came to lords, it should be The Lord Avebury, not Lord Avebury and when it came to Sir it should be Sir Bernard, not Sir Braine. I was always forgiven for my mistakes, however, because I was "the American." The group undertook missions, issued statements, called on the British government to take steps on human rights issues and exchanged correspondence with governments violating human rights. I helped with most things they did and even brought together the different political spectrums by deliberately drafting an appeal covering both a Turkish political prisoner and Andrei Sakharov: signing it had to be for both.

And I wrote a long book-length essay entitled *People's Republic of China: the Human Rights Exception*, which the Parliamentary Human Rights Group published in 1987 and which created a stir in the British and also American media. The idea for the article actually arose from a conversation I had in Addis Ababa with the Chinese Ambassador. He was retiring and departing Ethiopia and surprised us all by making references to human rights in his goodbye toasts at different embassies. He talked about the Cultural Revolution and how enormous numbers of Chinese died, were injured or their lives ruined. At the Indian Embassy farewell, he said he refused to -- when his government asked him to participate in the burning down of the Indian embassy in Beijing. He said he wanted the Indian Ambassador to know that he said he had to go to the dentist. Then he spoke of how important it was to have freedoms. Well, David and I accepted just about every invitation to the goodbye parties for him. At each one, he seemed to raise a different aspect of human rights. Finally I went over to him, told him about my

background in human rights, including with the Carter administration and assumed he was going to be pleased to hear it and pat me on the shoulder. Instead, he looked at me and said almost angrily, "Why didn't you do anything about China?" I was blown away, so when we got to London, I began to do research at Chatham House on why governments, non-governmental organizations, international organizations had done so little if anything on China.

In the Carter Administration, I had experienced how difficult it was to get anyone to address the human rights situation in China. Upgrading relations with China and undermining the Soviet-Chinese alliance blindsided everything else. Only on occasion did human rights issues come to the fore – in drafting the State Department human rights report and in fighting over whether police equipment should be provided. Patt Derian, I remember, characterized it well at a Congressional hearing when she said that U.S. human rights policy toward China if set to music would be "Home on the Range" where "never is said a discouraging word." EA [Bureau of East Asian Affairs] officials only wanted to talk about improvements in China. They used the Cultural Revolution as the benchmark for comparison so that China's human rights record always looked "positive."

The article I did had impact, leading to changes in policies toward China particularly by non-governmental organizations and other actors too. It was published not only by the British Parliament but in the U.S. by Johns Hopkins University (*Human Rights Quarterly*) and by the Asia department at the University of Maryland. Because nobody had ever written anything like this, the article made the *New York Times* as well as the British papers. And I was invited to present the paper at Chatham House. Originally Chatham House itself planned to publish the paper and got three readers all of whom recommended publication, but it chickened out, fearful of making waves and offending China – which seemed to prove the point of my paper. To make some kind of amends, they invited me to speak.

Q: What was the thrust of your research and writing?

COHEN: I was trying to answer the question, why so little had been done about human rights in China when the violations were so massive and the Chinese themselves had admitted to them. So I wrote about how different U.S. administrations viewed human rights in China, beginning with Kissinger who made it clear to Chou Enlai that what happened during the Cultural Revolution in China was entirely China's business. Then I looked at the responses of the Carter and Reagan administrations and the various official explanations for doing little or nothing. And I also looked at all the NGOs and intellectuals and why they refrained from doing much. Although most of the Sovietologists I met were highly critical of the Soviet Union, China experts were generally enamored of and protective of China -- its history, civilization -- and were willing to overlook many things because of China's long isolation and treatment by the colonial powers. Some went so far as to romanticize Chinese labor camps, comparing them to the kibbutzim in Israel.

Q: Barefoot doctors and that whole horrible movement of taking in Lechos and putting them out in the middle of the rice fields.

COHEN: Well, too many Western intellectuals saw all this as politically "progressive." They were fed up with the 'red scare' and anti-communism in the United States so that they wanted to give the benefit of the doubt to China. Another reason was the hope for access when China opened up. Everyone was hoping to get in. Still others were enamored of the country and its civilization and were unable to or didn't want to recognize the terrible violations being perpetrated.

Q: There was on the intellectual left the same damn thing in the 20's and 30's with the Soviet Union. I have seen the future and it works and that sort of nonsense. I am old enough to remember as a kid seeing some of this, the glories of the Soviet Union, mission to Moscow and all this.

COHEN: Yes, there was a lot of that with China too, that same attitude. Lots of reasons combined to make China what I called a human rights exception. But I challenged everyone's being so deferential. Chinese dissidents themselves had come forward and were issuing all kinds of letters and statements on democracy, and putting them on wall posters. The fact that there was a movement within China to connect to marked change. Of course, the importance of normalizing relations with China had the upper hand but after relations were established, it was no longer acceptable to ignore what was going on internally in the country, especially when Chinese inside were speaking out.

When China joined the United Nations, it began to ratify international human rights treaties which held it accountable on human rights and enabled others to question it. But sometimes governments and international organizations and even NGOs get stuck with an old stance even though the situation had changed. I had to criticize all my former colleagues in the human rights movement for not taking this up (Amnesty International excepted because they issued reports and spoke out). And they all moved forward -- Human Rights Watch and every other group. Because of my former role in the human rights movement, I was able to influence human rights groups to begin to publish reports on China, identify dissidents, and adopt a new approach. I think it influenced some governments too. The article was very widely disseminated and pointed to because no one had looked into this before.

Q: It is interesting. I haven't looked at it closely but was there an exiled Chinese community that was pounding the drums about doing something? Was it the same that you found with other exile communities?

COHEN: No, there were no exile movements championing the Chinese human rights cause. There was a 'lobby' on South Korea, the Philippines and Indonesia, and of course on the Soviet Union, but China had been isolated for so many years, that the same ties, access to the country and its people, networks, didn't exist. The Chinese remained largely nameless and faceless. And for a long time, there were no groups outside making noise.

Q: Did you and others find that things were really beginning to change?

COHEN: China was opening up to the rest of the world and beginning to develop economically and politically. Access increased tremendously and there was a dissident movement that had come forward and needed help. The Carter State Department had issued a statement about Wei Jingsheng, the democracy advocate who was imprisoned – I got to meet him years later when he was released and came to the U.S. but at this time, greater awareness was needed about all the individuals being arrested on political grounds in China. When Hu Yaobang spoke at Chatham House, I got up and asked him about four prisoners and read out their names, including Wei, even though the British chair of the meeting – a former labor prime minister I believe -- wanted to cut me off. But Hu took the question and it made the British papers.

Q: Well then you were in London for this year. Then what?

COHEN: We went to Togo for two years. David served as Ambassador from 1986 to 1988. He was originally asked whether he would like to be considered for Sudan but he declined being considered because he thought it wouldn't work well for me because I was Jewish --- my being Jewish has come up all my life. He was also concerned by the way they treated women (segregated dinners for example) which he knew would not sit well with me. He then was asked to go to Lebanon, not just to be considered but was asked to go as Ambassador, but he declined that too -- because I couldn't join him there (I would have had to stay in Greece), and he didn't want to be separated; he'd also have to live in a bunker, and he was well aware that in both Lebanon and Sudan, colleagues of his who were ambassadors had been killed. For the record, I was ready to go to Sudan and also Athens while he would be in Lebanon. Rwanda came up as well but the malaria medicine David would have to take for brain malaria did not agree with him. I mention all this because David got a presidential award for his work in Ethiopia – he was terrific in leading the embassy coolly and with shrewd judgment through very difficult times (the Ethiopian government's hostility, the death threats against him, the attacks on Embassy personnel, the great famine and addressing it, the civil war, the expulsion of the CIA operation, and so forth). He would have been far better off in a more challenging place than Togo. And the Department thought so too. But when Togo came open, he took it, so off we went.

Q: What was Togo like?

COHEN: Togo was a sliver of a country in West Africa, a former German and then French colony, run by a military man, Gnassingbé Eyadéma, who came into office after killing the country's first elected president Olympio. He had been in power for more than 20 years when we arrived. Although he was an authoritarian ruler, he was not as brutal as Mengistu. He did not kill tens of thousands of people. French influence was quite dominant when we were there although not always appreciated by the Togolese.

My own experience in Togo was not at all intense like in Ethiopia. While I taught at a graduate institute, I didn't have an involving job other than being wife of the chief of

mission. Nonetheless, I did manage to do one significant thing. I became involved in setting up the Togolese Human Rights Commission, a governmental organization, which the U.S. agreed to fund. The commission came about following a letter I received when we first arrived in Togo from a Togolese lawyer. He and other lawyers apparently knew of my human rights work and wanted to come and talk with me. The note said something like "We heard you are here." It almost sounded like the kind of note a resistance leader would receive. I invited them to the Residence to talk. The principal lawyer who came was Togo's representative to the UN Human Rights Commission. The other one worked for him and later became Togo's Ambassador for Human Rights but at the time I met him he was experiencing problems with the government because of statements he had made. In fact, he told me that the government had tried to poison him, but he had survived. At my husband's instructions, I kept all doors open so that it would not look as if anything secret were going on. Togo after all was a dictatorship and while the U.S. was a friendly state and not watched in the way it was in Ethiopia, we were still monitored in a certain way.

In my talks with the lawyers, I learned that they wanted to set up a national human rights commission, as urged by resolutions of the UN Human Rights Commission. But the Togolese needed resources to do that which their own government was not able or willing to provide. I knew the U.S. had a program for supporting such initiatives from my time in the Human Rights Bureau and so I put the idea forward to the Embassy DCM who didn't know about the program back at State, and USAID Washington agreed to support the proposal. The Embassy of course had to discuss the idea with the Togolese government and the government decided to endorse the idea of a commission for its own political and public relations reasons and huge banners of 'Les Droits de l'Homme' began appearing on the streets and events were held with animateurs dancing for human rights. The signing ceremony with the U.S. made the newspapers and I was referred to as "la mere de la commission."

The principal goals of this commission in the view of the lawyers – who spoke privately -- were to reduce police and military brutality in the gendarmerie posts around the country and provide a place where people could file complaints. Beatings had become routine, a common practice for anyone who happened to be brought in. It often had little to do with the security of the state. Once the commission was set up, its members began paying visits to the gendarmerie posts – in vehicles paid for by the U.S. -- and making the public aware they could make complaints. And commission members reported results. Gendarmerie officers, they said, became more cautious in what they did and there was a reduction in ill treatment. The commission also began to take up individual cases, but it steered away from well-known political cases. So for a certain period, everyone seemed to gain – Togolese people, the lawyers and the government. Several years later, the commission came under attack by the government, but it reportedly still stands today. Most importantly, it became the stepping stone for the setting up of an independent non-governmental human rights organization, which was not possible when we were in the country.

Let me go back a minute and say something about being the wife of the chief of mission. Probably things have changed today; I would hope so but in the late 1980s, the State Department really did not live in the same century that American women did -- as far as the wives of diplomats were concerned. The wife was expected to entertain, possibly undertake charitable works, but not much more. I went to the spouse seminars so I know but then I refused to participate in them, because I found that the women leading the seminars were carrying forward attitudes from a bygone era. I asked the organizers for example to put on the agenda at one of the seminars the question of the wife working. What were the pros and cons? But Betty Atherton and the wives in charge didn't want any discussion of this.

Q: Was there a reason you were given?

COHEN: They said it was too "sensitive" and that I should raise the issue from the floor if I wanted. I asked, "As a heckler?" I then told them that I was coming from Ethiopia and had received a U.S. government award for my work in that country. I had done something meaningful both for the United States and Ethiopia and thought other women might be interested to hear about the experience and how it might apply elsewhere. But one of the organizers responded, "The Chinese do that, husbands and wives work at the same embassy but we don't do that." I said, "Well, you don't have to do that, but you may want to think about it and talk about it. I think women would be interested." But the answer was no. It was not something they would even check out. Their agenda was clearly to keep the lid on. There was another wife working in a senior position at an Embassy, Phyllis Oakley, and there were probably some others, but nobody wanted to hear about it.

Yet another aspect of "the wives" that also bothered me -- at the posts I was at in Africa, many did not want to become involved with the local population; I saw it as ignorance and racism combined. In Togo, I became active in a local Togolese women's professional club, became friends with a number of the Togolese women, and became an initiator of club programs. Yet the wives at the American and other Western embassies formed a women's club of their own in Lomé and invited me to join but when I went there I didn't see one African face. So I asked, "Where are the African women? Is this a club of just Western women?" The answer came from an American Embassy wife, "Well, if we invite too many Africans then the others won't come." Well I said, "I don't plan to join unless you invite Africans." So they did, but sparingly. This was also an issue in Ethiopia where I made it a point to know and work with Ethiopian people in whatever way I could. Otherwise, I would have found myself spending an inordinate amount of time talking with diplomatic wives about menus, servants and what was wrong with the locals. My working at the Embassy in Addis was clearly beyond what a diplomatic wife was supposed to do. In fact, when I arrived in Addis, I was given a big loose-leaf book of recipes for cookies and cakes which the DCM's wife held for me -- it was handed down from chief of mission wife to chief of mission wife even though there was a full time cook. You know, this was a poverty stricken country with a devastating famine going on and a civil war, with one doctor for maybe every 75,000 people, and this is what was

given to me. I think the State Department wives could have used some fresh air and reform.

Q: Coming back to Togo, what was the political situation?

COHEN: Well, it was a French supported military government with one political party headed by Eyadéma. Statues of him and his mother were around town. It wasn't a brutal place like Ethiopia under the Derg but there were heavy restrictions on human rights. There was a large French business sector and the French invested heavily in the place, although a lot of that investment went back to France. Because of the French community, it was an important enough place for French presidential candidates to come to campaign. But basically, they looked the other way on human rights and political reform in the country. However, when the national human rights commission was formed, the French Ambassador made sure to make some positive statements about "les droits de l'homme."

Eyadéma was important to the U.S. because he was pro-Western, anti-communist and voted against Cuba in the United Nations. In fact, every year David had to go in and get that vote. I once accompanied him when he met Eyadéma. We were traveling up north to put plastic flowers -- real ones would wilt in the heat -- at his mother's mausoleum, something *de rigueur* for the U.S. Ambassador, and while there, we were summoned to Eyadéma's palace. I remember I had on sneakers and an old red sun dress because I had no idea he was up there and that we were to be invited to the palace for dinner and brought no other clothes. The palace had been built by Italian architects and had huge fountains with lights that made for multicolored sprays of water. It was so totally out of place in a landscape of small huts and poverty stricken people. At the dinner was only Eyadéma and a few of his cronies. Because we were Americans, he piped in Bob Dylan music. So there we were sitting in these huge, grand rooms, listening to the song, A Rolling Stone and to Eyadéma holding court. What he talked about I've never forgotten – he seemed somewhat morose and expressed fears of dying, of being killed in his bed. He said he didn't sleep well. His cronies looked very frightened because he asked them whether they thought he or they would die first. They must have feared he might have them killed and didn't know what to answer. And he must have feared being killed. He had us served French food but he and his friends ate Togolese food. When I told him I loved live animals when he showed us a room filled with dead, stuffed animals he had killed, he arranged to have us helicoptered around a game park. The helicopter had only one door (the other one was wide open) and the pilot, who was French, had been drinking. But when we were photographed prior to the trip David and I were all smiles but I remember being scared to death.

Because of the nature of the regime, I should add that corruption thrived. When the World Bank built a road in Togo linking the whole country, it apparently had to use contractors who were friends of Eyadéma. These friends used cheap materials, presumably to pocket most of the money with the result that the road washed away in the first heavy rains. Clearly, having to cater to the whims of the man in charge did not help the country grow politically or economically. I should note that international development agencies also took advantage of the government. One of the agencies – I

forget which – before we arrived persuaded the Togolese to build a cement factory in the country even though it was cheaper to import cement. The result was the remains of a factory that didn't operate, with Togolese development money misused.

The psychological impact of having been a colony was also apparent. I sensed psychological attitudes of inferiority toward the Europeans. That didn't exist in Ethiopia because it was never colonized. True, the Italians (Mussolini) invaded and occupied Ethiopia but that was different from the experience of being colonized.

Q: Actually the Italians didn't have it very long. The British took it over.

COHEN: But in 1896 the Italians lost to the Ethiopians at the battle of Adwa -- Ethiopia defeated the colonial power.

Q: They really had a terrible defeat.

COHEN: Every home has a picture of that battle. There is great pride. That pride didn't exist in Togo. They were colonized. I experienced the difference in the professional women's club I belonged to. It was a branch of the international Soroptimist club, which was headquartered in Europe. Well, when two of the European heads of the club came to visit Lomé, I was asked as the American Ambassador's wife and a member of the club to host them for tea at the residence. I was happy to do so, and a German and French woman arrived. Well I told them what a wonderful club and group of professional women the Togolese were and at one point I mentioned that I thought the Togolese club should have a vote in the decisions of the international club because it was such a terrific group. I had learned that in order for an African club to have a vote, there had to be at least two clubs in the country. But because Togo was a small country, it had only one club. As I pointed out, "That rules out a lot of small African countries from any votes in the international organization. Surely you want a democratic club," I told them. They replied, "Let us invite you to our next international meeting in Europe to speak to this issue. You can tell them about the Togolese club and its activities and raise the subject of representation." "But I am an American," I said. "Here are all these Togolese women who are very articulate and professionally successful and they belong to your club. They should be invited to speak and raise the issues they want." They looked more than surprised by my response and said, "Oh, but we would like you to come, you're the one who should come."

When the Togolese president of the club came to see me in her colorful headdress and long robe a few days later, she asked, "How did you find the women? Did you have an enjoyable time?" I said, "Marcelle, we had a nice time, but let's get to the point – you must know these women are racists." After looking a bit stunned, she sighed and said, "OK, but things are far better now than they used to be. Let me explain where we are coming from." She told me how Togolese were not allowed to learn their own history. They were not supposed to have a history, she said. "We only have French history, so I grew up learning only French history. I learned nothing about Togo." She then acknowledged that Togolese were considered lesser than the French, but said she could

never say anything like that in public. Well, I said, "OK, but you're all as talented and impressive as these other women, you should be represented fully in this European headquartered club and have a vote. Why should they invite an American to represent the club of Togo?" She looked pleased and thoughtful and subsequently this began a whole discussion at the club where many of the women seemed ready for that discussion.

Another issue I talked with them about was the Soroptimist club's affiliate in South Africa. I wondered whether it practiced apartheid. The women had no idea so I asked if the club would want to find out if there is a multi-racial club or clubs in South Africa. After all, the Togolese club was affiliated with the South African club. Well, again they were afraid to ask questions, but it did start a discussion. So I checked out Togo's votes at the UN, and they were consistently part of the African group's condemnations of apartheid. One night I was seated next to the Togolese foreign minister at a dinner, and I mentioned to him how much I enjoyed being in this club, and asked him if there is any reason why club members should not try to find out whether an affiliated club in South Africa was multi-racial. "You should be able to do that," he said. "We shouldn't be associating with apartheid. We have a policy on that." So I went back and told the women. But I think the reticence emanated from not wanting to rock the boat. You don't have many chances in a country like that. If you rock the boat you are out. Although the boat in this case seemed largely French colonial.

I did suggest having a committee set up in the club to talk about women's rights issues. Women joined it and we would meet and look at issues of concern to women -- the fact that the pension of women working for the government did not go to their children. If a man died his pension did go to his children, but the same was not true for women. And some of these women didn't have husbands or they were separated or divorced. I was the only Western woman involved in these discussions and felt privileged to be part of them. It was my hope that they would begin to identify ways to try to address the issues concerning them.

Q: Well in the first place did you find yourself in ticklish situations? You are the ambassador's wife and there you are promoting something that could be upsetting to the government.

COHEN: True, I was untraditional, and sometimes my husband joked, "Do you want to get us thrown out of here?" But he strongly supported what I was doing. And don't forget the Togolese government had endorsed the creation of a national human rights commission, which was set up with U.S. funding, and it put up banners all over the streets, "Droits de l'Homme." So my little tea parties and a meeting I organized with the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] were a kind of follow up in line with that. And together David and I invited over to the Residence some of the 'intellectuals' in town, including the poet and author Yves Emmanuel Dogbé, who wrote the book, *L'Incarcere* [it was published in France] about his arrest in Togo on political grounds. And we developed a friendship with him. When we left Togo I proposed him for the Lillian Hellman-Dashiell Hammett award, which he won because of the persecution he

endured and his commitment to freedom of expression. And we always kept in touch with the lawyers in the human rights commission.

Q: What about how were women treated at this point? I assume we are really talking about upper class women, upper class ladies.

COHEN: Well the professional women were lawyers, journalists, business women, media people and they were interested in getting ahead. But that feeling of inferiority affected how they saw themselves, how they saw their rights. It was almost like rights were something reserved for Western women, not for them. But the pension issue bothered all of them and there were other legal restrictions on their rights. They were just beginning to become aware of them.

Q: Well was there a carryover? Obviously the French had been working on human rights within the French government on these issues, and they were pretty well developed by this time. So there wasn't an automatic carryover to what the French had been doing with regards to women in Togo?

COHEN: France had development programs and perhaps some helped women, but it expressed its international human rights policy at the United Nations and other international fora; in Togo, the French were not promoting civil and political reforms as far as I could see. The status quo seemed their objective. It was part of maintaining French influence in Africa. In fact, the French ambassador was so imbued with La France and its influence in the country that he got up on July 14 at the French national day reception and gave a thundering speech about the glory of France. It was actually embarrassing and I had the impression that a number of Togolese looked away. One of the Togolese lawyers connected to the human rights commission who was nearby smiled at me and said, "le militant." Certainly, French policy changed some five or more years later and very markedly. They did a review of their policy toward French West Africa and began withdrawing the kind of support they gave so unconditionally to unsavory regimes. I mean these huge banquets in Togo given by President Eyadéma with wines, chateaubriands, cheeses and pates flown in from France while the minister of the economy would urge David to help the government get its foreign debt forgiven. When we were there, France's interest in human rights or women's rights was not publicly articulated. But I attracted their attention a little because the French ambassador's wife saw how active I had become in this Togolese women's club and had gotten my name and picture in the papers. She presumably felt that was her position. And the ambassador began to embrace les droits de l'homme in some statements and his wife began to show interest in joining the club, which she had never been interested in before.

Q: Well was she playing a positive role?

COHEN: She was playing the tea party/hostess role as far as I could see, and I think she awakened to the idea that there were other things to do, particularly when she saw me working with local women. I would go to villages in rural areas with the other Togolese club women to help rural women earn a little extra money. In one case, we got a local

chief to give some land to the women so they could grow palm oil and earn some money. Before his agreement to this – there was a signed paper -- we were asked to dance before the chief, and so I did, following the steps the Togolese women were doing. He seemed to like that the American Ambassador's wife was dancing in front of him. He approved our projects – not because of me, but it no doubt helped – we got the land and the women began to grow things and make some money. I also used to organize concerts and other events to raise money for Togolese institutions like a school for the blind whose students came to sing at the residence; and I raised funds for the American school. I began to go to all the French companies to get money for the Togolese projects.

Q: Well now did the French help? Were you challenging them?

COHEN: In a way, yes. But all the companies ponied up and gave money.

Q: It could be social but as far as their workers, were you breaking their rice bowl?

COHEN: The French were doing very well in Togo and I felt they ought to be putting their money into worthwhile projects for local Togolese that the women's club was promoting. It was the first time this club had actually tapped them for money for its projects, and certainly it was the first time the wife of the American Ambassador did. In fact I had been told they wouldn't give anything but they all did. I drafted the letters for funds with the Togolese women officers, the Togolese women's group signed the letters, the projects were good, and the French companies were able to show that they were supporting local Togolese projects which they liked for public relations. I read out all the contributors' names at the concert we had at the Deux Fevrier hotel which did not charge us for the use of their theatre.

Q: Well what about the Togolese husbands? I mean were you getting backlash about that?

COHEN: Not at all, and if the wives did, they took care of that. Some of them were quite outspoken. I did have the chance to talk with Togolese men in an advanced English conversation class (sponsored by USIA) to which professionals who wanted to improve their English came. Most were men and a number were in the foreign ministry, and some in senior positions. And I would engage them in all kinds of discussions because I could introduce whatever subject I liked. And they felt they could talk about things in English they wouldn't ordinarily talk about, such as development issues, women's rights. If I crossed a line no one said anything. Only one Foreign Ministry official commented that the class was "surprising," not what he expected but he enjoyed it and would continue.

Q: You mentioned the history. Togo has got this peculiar history of both German and French during the split. Was there much development here?

COHEN: Well the Togolese celebrate every year Germany's former rule over Togo [which ended in 1916] with an Oktoberfest, even though the German colonization was brutal. Germany of course did some good things -- developed roads and brought in

doctors and medicine, but it was known to be a rough colonization. Yet the Togolese hail it with beer drinking and ceremonies. But the French were the dominant colonial culture.

Q: Well first one of the things that struck me about Africa is when you go to study Africa as an American you end up pretty much at the colonial phase because there isn't a written language that one knows about. So you have archaeology, but it is also a place where stuff has been done in wood which has decayed. In other words there isn't much to go on.

COHEN: There is oral history though. There are tribal leaders and others who pass the history on but one has to expend the effort to talk to them. They know the culture in different areas, how the local people resolved their problems, how they governed themselves. It may not be in book form, but one can find out lots from oral accounts. In Togo, there are different tribes in the north and the south of the country, and members of these tribes are related to people in the same tribes in neighboring Ghana, since a border was arbitrarily drawn by the French and British. The Togolese military came from the northern tribes as did Eyadéma. In neighboring Benin, there was a very interesting history and culture, a king in Abomey and beautiful bronze artwork.

Q: Was there any effort to gather these oral histories and put them into a record?

COHEN: I imagine so, but I don't know. I am sure when done, it could be quite meaningful.

Q: How did the Togolese women there respond to you?

COHEN: They brought me a huge bouquet of roses after an event I organized which raised money for blind children. And they were pleased I was interested in the issues they cared about. And they felt comfortable meeting and talking with candor at the American Ambassador's Residence. It was a good cover. I already mentioned the pension issue as one of concern to women. Another was polygamy. In fact, one of the wives of a government minister told me that she was the second or third wife (I can't remember which) and was kept in a small apartment in town and given practically no money and the minister would visit her when he wanted to and would also beat her. She showed me scars on her head and arms. She was young, came from Ghana, and had been a teacher there. He had brought her back but she didn't know French. And her family would not take her back. Well I suggested to this wife that she develop a CV and try to teach English so that she could have a little money and a little independence and she came over to the residence and I helped her put one together. As far as the minister husband went, no one had a clue. When I asked David who had dealings with him what he thought of him, he said he seemed like a "very nice" man. That's what everyone thought.

Q: Did you get any feel for women in the villages particularly away from the well-educated?

COHEN: Well when we went and danced before the chief we were dealing with local women. They were women who tended the land for their husbands, took care of their families and wanted some independent income. That is why we went to their village and supported their getting some land, so they could grow things, develop a business, make money and decide how to spend it. I also learned how extended families did not always extend. I met older women who were all alone, living in little huts in a community of other people but there was no family member to help them. I also met women who had never seen themselves in a mirror. We brought some clothing for some very poor women and asked whether they would like to see what the clothes looked like on them. I had a mirror in my bag, but they had never seen themselves before. One was an elderly woman and I didn't know whether to show her what she looked like. If you have no idea what you look like it may be a shock. But she wanted to look in the mirror as did some others, and so she did. It was a poignant moment.

Q: I have heard in some of the Western African villages that you have witch doctors and societies which sometimes kill people. Was this a problem where you were?

COHEN: The power of voodoo was strong, including in Lomé. There were certain traditions, and people were afraid to break with them. One was funerals. They were quite lavish affairs. They were actually wonderful, they celebrated the person's life. Large numbers of persons would sit on the street in chairs and they would pass around the person's picture, his or her favorite poem or song and a band would play. It is not a mournful occasion. But the funerals are expensive because if you bring everybody together, set up chairs, print cards, provide food and all these things, it costs a lot. Students of mine at a graduate institute where I taught education (it wasn't my field but they needed someone to discuss the subject in English and I boned up) told me that modern Togolese didn't want to pay for these kinds of funerals. They said they would rather give the money to their parents when they were alive. But if they were to do that, they said, they might be killed by other members of the family because it was contrary to tradition and the ancestors in the other world would curse them. And the fetisheurs and voodoo doctors supported these traditions. In local areas, the fetisheurs had a lot of power. If there were robberies or crimes, it was sometimes more effective to go to the fetisheurs than to the police. Because if something were stolen the fetisheurs could put curses on them, call up ancestors, and people believed in that power. So if the fetisheurs were after you or knew what you did, you gave back what you stole to avoid a curse. I remember he Persian cat of the EU representative was returned after a fetisheur became involved. And even though the church had many missionaries in Togo…

Q: You are talking about the Catholic Church.

COHEN: Yes the Catholic Church. Catholic priests told me that when they did the last rites, under the bed were voodoo dolls. So crosses and voodoo dolls co-existed, and the Church had unofficially come to accept that mixture of belief. Layers of superstition and religious belief often blended together.

Q: When did you leave Togo?

COHEN: We left there in 1988 after about two years.

Q: What did you do after you left there?

COHEN: We did what the fetisheurs told us to do – we spilled a bottle of liquor on the lawn at the residence, carried 'safe travel' amulets with us and went off to Spain for about half a year -- we had bought a house in Mallorca -- and then we returned to the States.

Q: And you became involved in human rights didn't you?

COHEN: Of course, but a broader version. You see, I saw something in Ethiopia that disturbed me – drought, famine, civil war and people uprooted in their own countries. It was a much bigger agenda than the traditional human rights focus. I wanted to engage with that and I worked for more than a decade at the Brookings Institution, where I became a Senior Fellow and co-director of a project on internally displaced populations uprooted by war and disaster around the world.

Q: Well let's talk about this. It is an interesting topic. You know the Brookings Institution represents a power in itself, as do other of these institutions and organizations.

Yes, they can influence the policies of governments and international organizations. But let me mention that before going to Brookings, I worked at a small refugee think tank, the Refugee Policy Group (RPG). It was at RPG that I branched out from strictly human rights into humanitarian issues like refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) and drew the linkages between the two fields. Dennis Gallagher and Susan Forbes Martin, the leading lights at RPG encouraged me to do this. Before going there, I was offered a few positions to head human rights organizations, one in London, one in Washington and one in New York; and I had to think long and hard but I didn't want to do that anymore. I was tending in a different direction. The question also arose a few years later about my working in the Clinton Administration; the transition team contacted me, and Patt wanted me to go take over the Human Rights Bureau and Mike Posner, the head of the Lawyers Committee called me to find out whether the NGOs should get behind me. But I was told by Greg Craig and others that I was too controversial, that they were avoiding persons at State who brought back "old antagonisms" from the Carter human rights period.

At the same time, I was lured by something else. I had been in Africa for five years and I really wanted to do something different now that I had the opportunity. I had seen that people forced from their homes by war or famine had little protection in their own country; only if they crossed a border and became refugees was there an international system to help them. At RPG I began to write and speak about people displaced *inside* their own countries and their need for international protection when national protection failed. The issue of protecting people inside their countries resonated with me, and I wanted to try to make a difference if I could. At RPG, we organized in 1991 what became known as a seminal conference on the issue of IDP protection. The head of UNHCR

came, as did the head of UNICEF as well as other influential voices and the closing report served as a roadmap for the IDP agenda. Soon thereafter I became one of the known pioneers in the field. UNHCR invited me to go around the world, the World Bank sought me out for a consultancy. Since I knew the UN Commission on Human Rights from my work at State, and the NGO world, I worked with a group of NGOs in Geneva [the Quakers, the World Council of Churches, the International Commission of Jurists] to get the issue of internal displacement on the human rights agenda. The result was a resolution that requested the UN Secretary-General to appoint a Representative on internally displaced persons. It took a lot of doing, including going to Geneva, making speeches, talking to a lot of delegates, but we got it. The Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali wanted an African for the position since there were more IDPs in Africa than any other continent in the world. When the UN asked me, I recommended Francis Deng as did others. He was a former diplomat and scholar from Sudan (a Dinka), was on the RPG Board, and he directed the Africa program at Brookings.

An eloquent orator and quite brilliant, Francis became Representative of the Secretary-General in 1992, and he asked me to work together with him, and in 1994 Brookings offered me a fellowship for a year and I ended up staying for more than 12. Over that period we did the basic groundwork on IDPs, defining who they were, promoting a conceptual framework, getting standards developed (the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement), getting international and regional organizations involved, getting governments to adopt policies and laws, and mobilizing civil society around the world.

Brookings was a great environment to think through and develop an issue. Francis and I wrote the first major study on internal displacement [*Masses in Flight: The Global Crisis of Internal Displacement*, Brookings, 1998], which UN Ambassador Dick Holbrooke held up before the Security Council, and I published with Francis and also by myself a trove of articles, including in *Foreign Affairs* ["Exodus Within Borders"], the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* ["Nowhere to Run, No Place to Hide"], *Global Governance* and other journals. Our Project also organized seminars around the world with the UN and NGOs timed with visits of the Representative to those countries. The participants were governments, international organizations, regional bodies NGOs, IDP representatives. They took place in Asia, Africa, Latin America, the South Caucasus, Turkey, the Balkans. In those days, I circled the globe to promote attention and publicity to a new issue and get it on the international agenda. There was a lot of interest because it affected the security of different countries. Some governments worked with us, like Georgia and Turkey, because they saw the need to address the problem, but there was also pushback from others, like Russia and Sudan, and also from international organizations which initially resisted expanding their programs to include IDPs in a major way. Sometimes I was reminded of my experience of human rights at State where having a different vision, promoting a different agenda shook up people, offices and the vested interests behind them, so learning to overcome that opposition is an important part of what you have to do. Brookings was a great platform for getting the work done on IDPs.

Q: Let's talk a bit about, can you describe the Brookings Institution at this particular time when you got there? How it operated?

COHEN: The heart of the institution were the scholars. Each worked on different issues and there would be meetings to listen to and comment on each other's research. There were different programs – foreign policy, of which I was a part, economic studies, education, and within foreign policy there were different geographic centers. Later on, the institution expanded considerably. When I began in 1994, John Steinbruner headed foreign policy. He was a well-known military and security analyst and to get hired, I had to persuade him that displaced people were a subject that fit into a foreign policy and security framework. He was succeeded by Richard Haass, now President of the Council on Foreign Relations, and we also had to persuade him that humanitarian emergencies and internally displaced persons belonged in the foreign policy agenda. After a while he got it and began speaking out about IDPs in Kosovo and using the approach our project took toward sovereignty. Then came Jim [James] Steinberg who had been a Deputy National Security Adviser in the Clinton Administration and will soon become Deputy Secretary of State in the Obama Administration. He understood the significance of international norms like the Guiding Principles developed by our project and the relevance of displaced populations to national and regional security in conflict situations and often included me in public sessions at Brookings on Iraq and Afghanistan. Brookings had a high powered group in foreign policy and the foreign policy directors often brought in new people who had been with them in government. Some came to Brookings to wait out the next administration, write up their ideas and experiences and formulate future policies.

Q: I have the feeling that Brookings is the seat of the Democratic shadow government and that the Heritage Foundation and one or two others are the seat of the conservative and the Republican shadow government. Did that make any difference in your work?

COHEN: Well, when I joined Brookings, there were a lot of academics and experts who were serious long term thinkers with ideas, sometimes visionary, but they were not a shadow government. That changed when Michael Armacost became President in 1995. He had been Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs in the State Department under the Bush One Administration and he and Haass, and presumably a majority of the Board of Trustees wanted a more policy-oriented focus. They began getting rid of most of the scholars in foreign policy or the scholars left of their own accord and more policy-oriented people were hired. They spoke of "relevance," of influencing the U.S. government, attracting media attention, commenting on the news. They wanted op-eds and articles, not long scholarly books or long-term ideas. I was sure they were going to get rid of me because I didn't fit the new bill, but they didn't. But given the new regime, I had to make some adjustments, take media training, since suddenly I had to go on the BBC, CNN and NPR, and also write op-eds.

Q: By the way for people reading this, each generation has its own jargon. You had better explain what an op-ed is.

COHEN: It's an opinion piece published in the newspaper. It's not easy to do – it has to be succinct, topical, well written – 700 to 800 words, unless you're Henry Kissinger and

you can write as much as you want. And it has to be policy driven. I struggled at first but then I had some published in the *New York Times, Washington Post, International Herald Tribune, Newsday, Baltimore Sun and Christian Science Monitor*. But that was nothing compared to some of my colleagues like Mike O'Hanlon – a genius at grasping and boiling down complex issues -- who got published all the time. Of course, my main target was not United States policy but rather getting United Nations and foreign governments to act on displaced populations. But when it fit, I focused on the U.S., in particular on Iraq and Afghanistan.

When Bush Two [George W. Bush] became President, some of the Clinton people came in -- Strobe Talbott, former Deputy Secretary of State, became Brookings President and Jim Steinberg became foreign policy head while Haass went off to join the Administration. Both Strobe and Jim supported the institution's remaining 'relevant' to U.S. foreign policy, and brought in former Clinton officials who most assuredly will leave again when the Obama Administration comes in [e.g., Susan Rice, Phil Gordon, Ivo Daalder etc.]. Although Strobe promoted greater nonpartisanship, and some Republicans joined, it basically remained a Democratic think tank, frequently described as centrist, on occasion liberal, which in earlier days it had been more regularly called. I remember when there were renovations at Brookings and a chart of offices was circulated, it said to the left of Roberta Cohen, and someone penned in, "if that's possible;" on the other hand others called me the "hard headed humanitarian."

Q: When you were there, did you get involved in the horrendous Rwanda problem?

COHEN: When I started in '94, the genocide had already taken place. But it made more compelling the work I was doing on displaced persons, peacekeepers and protection of minorities and ethnic groups caught up in conflict. General Romeo Dallaire of Rwanda fame contributed to meetings we organized on international peacekeeping and IDP protection. And on the tenth anniversary of the Rwanda genocide, when genocidal acts in Darfur were taking place, an urgency developed because of what happened in Rwanda and UN officials and NGOs began to publicly state that we can't allow that to happen again. So the response to Darfur -- and I contributed various articles and organized various programs at Brookings -- was stronger than it would have been because of the shameful lack of response to the Rwanda genocide. In fact, former U.S. officials like Susan Rice who had come to Brookings became very outspoken on Darfur and on U.S. and international military action after publicly apologizing for having failed to take steps to stop the Rwanda genocide during the Clinton administration. She was hardly alone in this endeavor. President Clinton himself apologized repeatedly.

Q: Were there clashes, disputes over one approach versus another approach?

COHEN: Sure, when there were meetings on different subjects scholars disagreed with each other like about whether the U.S. should get militarily involved in Kosovo for example. That was something I was out front in favor of because of humanitarian concerns and the belief that it was in international and U.S. interests to help protect people being attacked and persecuted in their own countries. The program I co-directed

was very much behind the concept of an international responsibility to protect when governments failed in their national responsibility. The internal displacement project based this on the idea of 'sovereignty as responsibility' which had evolved from Francis Deng's work on Africa and also from my own on human rights and IDPs. Our books and articles regularly pointed out that when governments fail in their responsibilities to provide for the security and well-being of their populations, and large numbers are at risk, responsibility must shift to the international community. Some called it the "Brookings doctrine."

There were also big arguments over the Iraq war and whether or not to invade in 2003. The military security aspects of foreign policy were not my expertise but I was very opposed to that war and pointed out it had nothing to do with advancing human rights or humanitarian goals, which sometimes were claimed as rationales for the war. Once the invasion took place, I was the Brookings scholar to focus attention on the need to protect Iraq's civilians and displaced populations and contain sectarian violence. I was quoted in major newspapers, appeared on The O'Reilly Factor, the Diane Rehm show and various programs, published an op-ed in the *International Herald Tribune* and other papers, was a speaker at Brookings public meetings and tried to influence officials at State and in the Pentagon to step up protecting civilians and humanitarian supplies.

Q: Let's turn to the problems that came about with the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Kosovo I guess is the major one. Where did you stand on this and what were you pushing?

COHEN: I was in favor of NATO's intervention when the Security Council failed to act. I did not feel that the international community should remain powerless when it came to mass atrocities. And my particular area of expertise -- the internally displaced came very much to the fore. Although most of the population of Kosovo was pushed out by the Serbs, there was little or no attention being paid to those left behind – the IDPs. And this I wrote and spoke about. The bombing campaign was at such a high level that it didn't really help to protect people on the ground and even sometimes hit them. The U.S. wanted to avoid American casualties but clearly a better international protection system was needed for IDPs.

Q: Well how did this play out as far as you were concerned? Could you be a player or were you just someone who was writing stuff?

COHEN: Inasmuch as articles and media influence people and policies, I played a role in focusing attention on protecting those internally displaced. I think it contributed to a certain momentum to help the IDPs. The advocacy influenced the policies of governments and international organizations by pointing out how international attention in emergencies like Kosovo focused on refugees but neglected IDPs. The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement whose development our Project oversaw began to be used by governments and international organizations and these standards were endorsed by the World Summit Outcome document -- 193 states -- in 2005. International agencies increased their involvement in programs to protect and assist people displaced inside their

own countries, including in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and other places. It was a relatively new focus and it began to take.

Prior to the 1990s, the international community concentrated primarily on refugees – those outside their countries in emergencies. It was a deliberate choice because of traditional notions of sovereignty. That changed substantially at the end of the Cold War. The appointment of a UN official to deal with IDPs reflected the change in thinking. And Francis and I were heavily identified with the shift in attention. Richard Holbrooke called us "Mr. and Mrs. IDP," and we began to win awards for our bringing forward onto the international agenda the IDP issue and developing the conceptual and legal bases for its foundation. I remember a UN official from Geneva who was visiting DC came over to Brookings because she said she had a question to ask: "Do Francis and you know that you are making a revolution?" was the question. And I remember answering: "yes we know." In 2005, we won the Grawemeyer Award – it was a $200,000 prize for Ideas Improving World Order. It was Patt Derian who suggested we apply after hearing what we were doing. I was also awarded an honorary doctorate from the faculty of law at the University of Bern in Switzerland for my contribution to the Guiding Principles. And earlier in 2002 I won a DACOR award [the State Department Diplomatic and Consular Officers Retired 50th Anniversary Award for Exemplary Writing in Foreign Affairs and Diplomacy] because of my focus on "non-traditional areas of concern for practitioners of diplomacy" – refugees and IDPs and for encouraging "effective international humanitarian action." Strobe Talbott applauded my getting that award and stated publicly "Largely due to her work, the issue of internally displaced persons is finally beginning to get the attention it deserves from national governments, international institutions, NGOs, and the public." Francis won many awards as well.

What the awards signified was that the international community had begun to recognize that the post-World War II international system set up to deal with refugees was no longer adequate to today's emergencies. The arrangement that allowed us to promote this -- a joint operation between a think tank and the UN -- came to be considered an innovative way of moving forward with a new approach to an international problem. Foundations and governments supported us. When I retired in 2006, the Oxford journal, the *Forced Migration Review*, published a special issue called "Putting IDPs on the map" [December 2006]. One of the articles by a senior UNHCR official wrote that, "Roberta Cohen has encouraged, cajoled and even shamed the UN into assuming a more effective role to protect IDPs. Throughout two decades of tireless advocacy she has consistently argued that UNHCR should be more engaged in IDP protection. Her hopes are now being realised." It was a gratifying thing to read but it was a big effort and sometimes a struggle to try to turn around governments and international organizations in their thinking and operations but it was not entirely new to me, having been involved with trying to promote human rights in foreign policy in the Carter Administration.

Q: Did you see an evolution in the non-governmental agencies and international organizations on how they dealt with such issues over the years?

COHEN: Oh yes, there was definitely an evolution in the thinking and work of NGOs and also the UN. They began to focus more on persons uprooted inside their countries and ultimately, IDPs benefited in different countries. Attention also shifted to how to 'protect' them. To be sure, the ICRC [International Committee of the Red Cross] had been involved in the protection of civilians for decades. And of the international organizations, UNHCR too had been involved in assisting and sometimes protecting IDPs in a number of countries. But mostly NGOs and international organizations focused on providing food, medicine, and shelter to IDPs. Many knew little about trying to protect them. In fact, the term, the 'well fed dead' came into vogue because feeding people but not paying attention to their protection needs was found to result in deaths. I believe we succeeded in getting the UN agencies and NGOs to think more about integrating assistance and protection -- that is, trying to take steps to enhance physical security which was often different for IDPs than for refugees. I remember going with Francis Deng to discuss the protection issue with UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Sergio Vieira de Mello – who later was tragically killed in Iraq] and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson. And although some in the UN building found the subject too "provocative," these two were ready to promote the protection idea. And a UN policy on the protection of IDPs was developed and adopted by all the agencies, including NGO umbrella groups.

Q: But usually doesn't this mean disciplined men with guns who are shooting at the bad guys?

COHEN: No, there are many steps to be taken short of armed forces and military police where you can try to protect people and where you can advocate for them with their governments. In Bosnia, the journalist Roy Gutman broke the story about the concentration camps, which in turn led to Serbs and others being brought before an international criminal court. And while in some cases, military intervention was needed, other forms of protection were also needed – helping people evacuate, accompanying them to their homes, monitoring the situation, taking steps to reduce sexual violence, addressing discrimination in aid on racial or religious grounds and engaging in advocacy for those at risk. All of this was somewhat new to try out in the 90's. There was also pushback against it – because of the dangers, the sovereignty issue, the exceeding of mandates and so forth.

Q: What about the Congress and Congressional staffers? Had you built up a network of movers and shakers and sort of a professional level in Washington over the years?

COHEN: My main focus in the U.S. was not the Hill but the State Department and USAID. I wanted the U.S. to promote greater attention to IDPs and ensure that the international organizations it funded -- UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP – did so. Francis and I were called in by USAID to help develop a policy on internal displacement, which was announced in 2000. And yes, I did go over to the Hill a number of times to testify on internal displacement before different bodies, including the Helsinki Commission on security and cooperation in Europe and other subcommittees on questions about displacement in Armenia and Azerbaijan and I presented recommendations for U.S.

action. In 2003, the Bush administration invited me to be on their delegation to the OSCE [Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe] and I went to Warsaw and had to negotiate with Turkey and Russia to bring them on board in support of the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and then to get all the states to support OSCE programs on IDPs based on those standards. And I managed to get that done.

An interesting aside for me was being on a Bush administration delegation; I felt I had to make clear before joining the delegation that I didn't agree with some of their policies (on Iraq, torture and habeas corpus for example) and would not defend them. But they responded that as long as I didn't attack the Administration while on the delegation, it was fine. I actually had the same deal with the Clinton administration when I was on their delegation to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 1998 because I didn't agree with a number of their human right policies – on economic and social rights and on slavery -- although my disagreements were not as great as with the Bush policies. While on the Clinton delegation I mobilized support for the Guiding Principles and was able to speak on behalf of the U.S. in support of the Principles. It contributed to getting them acknowledged by a UN body for the first time.

When Holbrooke was named ambassador to the UN, he took up the issue of internally displaced persons, and as I mentioned, he took the book Francis and I wrote and brought it to the attention of the Security Council. He was president of the Council at that time and he held it up and told everybody to read it. I don't think the Russians and the Chinese were especially eager to buy copies of this Brookings book, which were selling in the UN bookstore. But Holbrooke wanted them and the other states to promote protecting people inside their own countries. The issue grabbed him; he publicly called upon the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata, who was present, to protect not only refugees but displaced people inside their countries. I soon began to work with his office reviewing his speeches and lectures on that subject, and the State Department gave my project at Brookings a grant, at his recommendation. That was quite a jump from the kind of relationship I had with Holbrooke and his East Asia Bureau during the Carter Administration.

Q: Well from what you are saying I gather that you were one and obviously there were others too acting as a spark plug in developing a growing sophistication in dealing with some of these human tragedies that international organizations became involved in as well as NGOs like Doctors without Borders.

COHEN: Yes, I do think we played a kind of catalytic role.

Q: Were you seeing at the time you were doing this a real cadre of professionals to deal with this and have answers?

COHEN: Yes, I think that began to happen in the 1990s when NGOs and UN agencies expanded humanitarian operations on the ground inside countries in conflict. All of these humanitarian workers and human rights monitors were on the front lines and had to adapt pretty quickly to learning about internally displaced populations and their protection and

assistance needs. Some did it well, like MSF (Doctors without Borders) which combined assistance and protection in their programs. Others didn't do so well but made an effort to try. And our Project at Brookings also began training a group of what I have called 'disciples' like Erin Mooney, Diane Paul, Gimena Sanchez, Megan Bradley, David Fisher, Simon Bagshaw, Naomi Kikoler – most of whom went on to UN agencies and NGOs and carried forward skills for protecting IDPs.

As for humanitarian NGOs, they developed the Sphere standards to improve their response to disasters and hold themselves accountable. About two weeks ago I gave a talk to African diplomats at the National Defense University. Quite a number expressed frustration, even anger with the humanitarian NGOs in their countries and were critical of their behavior whether for proselytizing or conspicuously throwing money around. I am trying to get NGOs to meet with these African diplomats because I feel there has to be a dialogue. Some African governments of course really want to restrict the freedom and independence of NGOs on political grounds. At the same time NGOs need to observe standards. When there is a big emergency like the tsunami, hundreds of NGOs came on the scene but not all were well qualified.

Q: They want to do good and they feel like they have God's blessing or the blessing of mankind to lead them and don't get in my way.

COHEN: Something like that, but when they don't consult with the people they are trying to help, it is not helpful. Yet quite a number do wonderful work, in particular the ICRC and some of the more well-known NGOs like the International Rescue Committee, Oxfam, MSF, the Norwegian Refugee Council. And they have developed a cadre of protection people, and have become much more self-critical and also sophisticated in dealing in countries in the middle of conflicts. And then there are the very fine advocacy organizations like Refugees International (RI) which promoted greater protection not just for refugees but for IDPs. Lionel Rosenblatt and Joel Charny and Ken Bacon were all out front for RI.

Q: Is there a way the NGO community polices itself so that it doesn't have people who are saying going into a stricken country with the goal of proselytizing or promoting its own purposes?

COHEN: There is no enforcement or real policing but there are these standards the NGOs have developed and committed themselves to. For example, the standards insist on aid on the basis of need, *not* on the basis of what governments or donors may want done with the funds. They also call upon NGOs to help people on both sides of a conflict in line with principles of neutrality and impartiality. One of the cases presenting the worst dilemmas occurred when the Hutu *genocidaires* from Rwanda fled to the DRC [Democratic Republic of the Congo] and were in refugee camps in need of assistance. The question arose -- should the UN be aiding people who committed genocide or should the UN depart? Mrs. Ogata, the High Commissioner for Refugees said, "I don't have the luxury to walk out," not with all the refugees there who weren't genocidaires. But NGOs like MSF did walk out because they felt that their aid was also helping people who were

criminals and who were going to use the aid to launch another attack on Rwanda. These were very difficult decisions for NGOs and international organizations to make. There's also been a debate about North Korea. The government doesn't allow humanitarian organizations access to all areas of the country, and it doesn't allow in aid staff who understand Korean and it diverts some of the food aid to the military and elite. Should the aid agencies work with this government? MSF walked out as did other NGOs but the World Food Program stayed on because they said they were gradually expanding their access and reaching people in need. Others argued that WFP was helping to strengthen the regime. There remain tremendous disputes over what humanitarian action should be in a lot of these situations. The decisions are not easy.

Q: I know we just went through a very difficult time in Burma, called Myanmar where there was a cyclone. And the Burmese government restricted aid for a long time. Did you get involved in that?

COHEN: I have written about that and spoken on the Hill on the need for disaster standards in Asia. ["Disaster Standards Needed in Asia," Brookings 2008]. Burma was the worst case scenario in delaying and obstructing international aid to its population. But you know China also would not allow in aid workers from Western countries during its earthquake, which may have cost lives, although unlike Burma, it took giant steps to help its population by comparison. Burma did not seem to have the capacity or willingness to assist its people and it discriminated against Western aid and Western NGOs, resulting in deaths. It took a lot of pressure coming from the UN, from Ban Ki-moon, the Secretary-General, and from states in ASEAN to get the government to allow in international aid. There was plenty of controversy over whether aid should be forcibly brought in by military force or whether it should be done by political negotiation. The negotiation route won out and eventually it did succeed although no one knows how many preventable deaths there were.

Q: As of today, how would you describe the evolution and I assume there has been an evolution of the UN as an instrument in conflict situations?

COHEN: The UN since the 1990s has been trying to set up a more predictable international system to reach people at risk. It has been an uphill struggle because of sovereignty issues, resources, capacity and political will but there is now greater recognition that the international community has a role and responsibility to play when people are in dire need inside their countries and when their own governments are unable or unwilling to protect or assist them. The humanitarian agencies are on the scene pretty quickly and have learned to work with military forces when this is needed. In Kosovo, UN agencies and NGOs had to work with NATO, although some NGOs balked, and in other places with UN forces. But in most cases, the UN doesn't have all the tools to effectively achieve the involvement needed. When it comes to providing security through military action, the UN does not have the strategic reserves that would enable it to rapidly deploy police and military to countries. It has to go around hat in hand to try to get a force together. And this takes time, despite the urgency on the ground, and sometimes the result is an untrained and even undisciplined force from poor countries that need the

foreign exchange and send whoever. For their part, Western countries don't always send in troops. So the system is struggling. It is a work in progress. Yet the Security Council now has protection of civilians on its agenda, which is new, and every year the Council makes recommendations on what should take place. The World Summit adopted the concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P) for people under threat of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity or ethnic cleansing when their own governments don't have the capacity or willingness. So there is an evolution in thinking about sovereignty and the role of the international community but there is a long way to go in implementing the idea.

Q: Well are you continuing with this work?

COHEN: Of course, it's in my DNA. I retired in 2007 but am still associated with Brookings as a Non-Resident Senior Fellow and I continue to serve as senior advisor to the Representative of the UN Secretary General on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons [this concluded in 2010]. And I have an association with Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of International Migration. And I have been teaching at the American University Washington College of Law in a special summer program. I also keep up speaking and writing. Brookings asked me to develop a set of recommendations on IDPs for the next Administration which I did with Dawn Calabia and it turned out to be influential [*Improving the US Response to Internal Displacement: Recommendations to the Obama Administration and the Congress*, Brookings, 2010].

I have also become involved in a new area of work, going back to my human right days – I have become the Vice Chair of an NGO, the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea [in 2011, Cohen became Co-Chair], a bi-partisan group in Washington DC, where I've become active in drawing attention to one of the worst human rights situations in the world, and largely closed off from public view. That's a new challenge for me. On the Committee are leading lights like Andrew Natsios [co-chair], Mort Abramowitz, Winston Lord, Carl Gershman, Marc Noland and others. I've been doing a lot of writing and speaking on the subject, preparing Congressional testimony and testifying before a UN commission. I also work on prevention of genocide issues with the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights (directed by Felice Gaer) and as a member of the Committee on Conscience at the Holocaust Museum.

Q: Where do you see the challenges now? Do you see anything new on the horizon?

COHEN: Climate change is on the horizon and will lead to tremendous destruction, uprooting of people and serious human rights problems across the globe.

Q: We are talking about high tides or bad weather essentially?

COHEN: Yes, cyclones, earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, rising sea levels. We already experienced Katrina in this country. If these disasters become much worse, as is expected, we are going to see coastal areas going and some countries actually disappearing. I mean island countries or parts of countries, and there is going to be

tremendous displacement and destruction and also the need to protect the human rights of these people. Climate change produces slow onset disasters as well – droughts, desertification. Just look at Darfur – where reduced grazing land and water combined with an irresponsible government and helped produce conflict and genocidal acts. The world is not well prepared for this.

Another important issue to deal with is the *prevention* of conflict and mass atrocities tearing countries apart. Responding to conflicts is costly in lives and resources, and the international community has not always accomplished this very well. Look at Srebrenica in the former Yugoslavia and the genocides in Rwanda and Darfur. And look at countries where efforts have been made to reconstruct them and they turn into failed states. A good deal of thought therefore is being given to how to prevent conflicts and the humanitarian and human rights emergencies they spawn. I was part of a task force working group on prevention of genocide and mass atrocities, chaired overall by Madeleine Albright and William Cohen. Discussions focused on the steps to take to respond before genocidal assaults get out of hand, how that can be accomplished, what the indicators are that conflict and genocidal acts may occur, how to mobilize the political will. Clearly, a tremendous effort will be needed. We will see what the Obama administration makes of all this.

Q: Well Roberta I want to thank you very much. I think this is a good place to end the interview.

End of interview