

Name of Interviewee: Noal Cohen

Recording Identification: Rec001_0027

Google Drive Folder: Oral Histories / Montclair150 / montclair150-01-Cohen

Additional Materials: TV34 interview.

Date: 04/06/2018

Interviewer: Jane Eliasof and a student

Location: First Montclair House Community Room on 56 Walnut St, Montclair, NJ

Introduction:

Dr. Noal Cohen and his wife family moved into Montclair in 1967 after living briefly in Illinois for graduate school and California for a post-doctoral fellowship; he had been raised in Rochester, New York and worked there as well. He moved to Montclair for a job at Hoffman-LaRoche in Nutley, where he worked in research and development. They raised two girls in Montclair; the children attended Montclair public schools.

While he was not very involved in Montclair organizations, his wife Ann owned a popular toy store, Toys in the Attic, on Church Street until 2005 and was active in the Montclair Economic Development Organization and the Montclair Business Improvement District (BID). Dr. Cohen helped her in the store after he retired from Hoffman-LaRoche. He expresses concern for the difficulty mom and pop stores like hers had with rising rents and high-end chain stores coming into town and feels that some charm from those small businesses has been lost to the town.

Dr. Cohen talks at length about his interest in music, particularly jazz, and his experiences playing in Rochester, NY and in New Jersey. He shares links to several websites that he maintains and some online publishing that he was involved with.

Living in Montclair, his family moved several times including an apartment complex at 77 Orange Road, their home on Euclid Street, and the condominium he and his wife moved into in the former Baldwin Street School on Glenridge Avenue.

His wife Ann was Baptist, and he is Jewish. While he never felt discrimination when they lived in California or here in Montclair, he describes several incidents in Illinois, when he was attending graduate school at Northwestern.

Dr. Cohen speaks at length and lovingly about his wife Ann, who had passed away in 2017 approximately one year prior to the oral history interview, and her store.

Timestamps:

Q: When did your family come to Montclair?

Dr. Cohen: 1967. So, I just barely made the 50-year cutoff.

Q: From where did they come?

Dr. Cohen: We moved here from California, but I'm originally from upstate New York, Rochester, as you can tell from my accent.

Q: And have you stayed in Montclair since?

Dr. Cohen: Yes.

Q: What brought them here?

Dr. Cohen: A job.

Q: Which was...

Dr. Cohen: I worked at Hoffmann-LaRoche in Nutley, Clifton, for 27 years. I retired in 1994. I took early retirement.

Q: Do you have children?

Dr. Cohen: Yes. We have two children, two girls. The older one lives in Houston; the younger one was born in California, and she lives in Montclair.

Q: Can you tell us anything about their childhood here?

Dr. Cohen: Both went through the Montclair School System; The older one would have started, around the time that we moved here. So, we saw a lot of changes during those years. But, overall I would say that we never had any problems with the schools...thought it was a good system, and, did well by our kids. If they did not do well, it was not the school system's problem.

[3:00]

Q: Did your family belong to any community groups?

Dr. Cohen: No. My wife became very active in the town, in, probably the mid-1980s, and she was active in things like the Montclair Economic Development Corporation and the Downtown B.I.D. [Business Improvement District]

Q: What did she do with them?

Dr. Cohen: Well. She owned a store called Toys in the Attic, 40 Church Street, that became, you know, a retail destination.

Q/Jane Eliasof comment: I brought my kids there!

Dr. Cohen: Everybody says that! After I retired, she asked me if I could help her out, so I did, and that was quite an eye-opener: I had never really worked in a retail setting before. And it was amazing how much more I felt I had accomplished each day, as opposed to working for Hoffmann-La Roche, where I spent 27 years spinning wheels.

Q: What did you do at La--at Hoffmann-La Roche?

Dr. Cohen: I have a doctorate in Organic Chemistry, so I worked in both process research and, drug discovery. And (anticipating a question with a self-deprecating chuckle) “never discovered anything. Tried!”

Q: Did you enjoy your retail work?

Dr. Cohen: Well, it was interesting to see what goes on. And what's so sad now is that what she represented and, and businesspeople like her, is being pushed out totally. In fact, she kind of got pushed out. She closed in 2005, and there was a movement among the wealthy, and powerful, people that owned property in downtown Montclair; they were trying to get rid of Mom and Pop stores, so they could bring in high end chains, which happened in a few instances. But I never could understand that because Montclair is not a mall. Where are all these people going to park?

[05:25]

But that was kind of unfortunate, because I think part of the nature of the town has been lost by losing businesses like hers. She tried to sell it, but she couldn't because of the high rent costs. She retired at the end of her lease, and the new lease would have been at a monthly rental that was outrageous for the amount of money she could make. So, all the potential buyers dropped out, and she ended up liquidating.

Q: Downtown ten years, fifteen years ago, versus now, was a little different.

Dr. Cohen: Yeah. I think it's very discouraging.

[6:25]

Q: What did you do in your spare time when you weren't working?

Dr. Cohen: Well, I've worn many hats...I'm a musician, as well. My field is jazz. I actually played before I went to school. I said I'm from Rochester, New York, and we're going back to the 1950s—it was a happening town. It had the Eastman School of Music, and it also had a lot of fine musicians--mostly of Italian nationality, up that part of state had a lot of Italian immigrants.

And there was a lot of music going on, and I eventually got into it, to the extent of joining the union, and playing with some very fine musicians. Local home-grown people, and students at the Eastman School of Music. At that time Jazz was a dirty word, there was no Jazz Studies Program, like they have everywhere now, you know. But we would sneak into practice rooms-- I never went to the Eastman, but we would sneak into practice rooms and have jam sessions: twelve people packed into this little room!

Those were great days. So, after I retired, I got back into music; but not so much as a player, more as a writer. I've coauthored a book, and I've written several journal articles, things like that. I've written liner notes for CDs. I have three websites.

[<<https://attictoys.com/>>; <<https://attictoys.com/noal-cohens-collection-of-jazz-photos/>>; <<https://www.facebook.com/noal.cohen>>; plus <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6u9JvA7wROY>>]

I started to publish online, because publishing books is not very rewarding.

Q: Do you still play?

Dr. Cohen: Not very much.

Q: What was your instrument?

Dr. Cohen: It was drums. I play a little piano, but I don't play much anymore.

Q: Did you ever play with musicians downtown?

Dr. Cohen: Oh, yeah. You see, what happened was, I had a career crisis. At La Roche in 1985, maybe you remember this, it was called "Operation Turnabout..." and this is when the Valium [prescription drug] patent expired, and they [had major layoffs]. I survived that, but things were never the same. So, I was just waiting until they would come up with a decent package, which they did in 1994; and, and I got out then. But about the same time as that upheaval, I started to play again, and the only people that I had anything in common with were some of the older Newark musicians, some of whom were very good, and had actually been on records and stuff. That was kind of interesting...most of them are gone now.

[10:22]

I had a steady gig for several months...Saturday nights at a place in Teaneck. The leader was a guy from Montclair, a tenor saxophonist by the name of Coy Shockley. And, and I think, frankly, the only reason I was hired was because I was sober transportation to and from Teaneck.

Q: (Laughing) What was the name of the place in Teaneck?

Dr. Cohen: The Deep Sea; it was a seafood restaurant.

But the notable thing about that was the guitar player was a guy named Jimmy Ponder, from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who was a world class guitar player. I mean it was just mind boggling, you know, to play with somebody like that (laughing), because I never really had played with anybody that was that good with the music...just flowed out. Actually on my website, there's a picture, the background picture is me playing in that club with that crew.

[Some websites related to these people:

<<http://www.hammondjazz.net/index.php?page=musician&target=825>><<https://www.fretboardjournal.com/columns/jazz-guitarist-jimmy-ponder-1946-2013/>><<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npHqbfCIklw>>]]

And there's also a picture of me playing on Church Street. When they did Oktoberfest, my wife would get me to play on the street, so we did that for several years.

Q: Okay. Were there any other venues in town that you played at?

Dr. Cohen: Not really. Do you remember the Sterington House? But I never played there, and it's been gone for a long time. I think that building is now the Greek Restaurant, right? [Greek Taverna, Bloomfield Avenue, former livery stables]

I remember the Key Club in Newark. But, those disappeared pretty much not long after we moved to this area.

[12:30]

Q: What street did you move onto?

Dr. Cohen: We first moved to that big apartment complex, 77 Orange Road, right near Hillside School. And we lived there for a couple of years. But my wife didn't like it, she didn't get along

with the neighbors above us; I never quite understood what that was all about, but we went looking for a house much sooner than I had planned. So, in 1969 we bought a house on Euclid Place, which is off of Grove Street, between Watchung and Claremont, in that area. And we lived there until 2006. In 2006 we moved to a condo. Now this is interesting:

This is 15 Glenridge Avenue, it's that big, renovated school across from Nicolo's Bakery.
[former Baldwin Street School]

Now the interesting thing, when they renovated that in 1985, they divided it between Glen Ridge and Montclair. So, 14 units are in Glen Ridge, and 21 are in Montclair. We're in Glen Ridge. The upshot of this is we have to vote in Montclair, because the address of the building and therefore everybody's address is 15 Glen Ridge Avenue, in Montclair. However, we can't vote on any issues that affect our [Glen Ridge] property tax. If our kids had been the right age, at that time, they would have gone to Glen Ridge Schools, not Montclair Schools. So, it's taxation without representation.

And I've raised this issue with the town and with the county and gotten nowhere. And I think the only way to get anywhere would be to hire a lawyer, which, you know, I have no intention of doing because basically the property taxes are obscene in both towns.

[15:01]

Q: Would you say you spent most of your time on Euclid?

Dr. Cohen: Yes.

Q: So, tell me a little bit about that community.

Dr. Cohen: It's a nice street, quiet street, we were just about four houses from the Glen Ridge border; people were generally friendly. It was kind of diverse, but not terribly diverse. And it's an interesting thing about Montclair, I kind of have to look at it in a kind of a negative perspective. There was always, and remains, income disparity, economic disparity, and racial problems. It's very much like the rest of the country, I guess, and even worse now, you know, in view of what we're going through. But it was a great town, I consider it my home now. Let me say this, my wife passed away in February 2017, a little over a year ago.

Our condo was pretty big, it's the biggest one in that building, 1500 square feet, and I don't need anything that big, so I thought about moving, but I can't come up with a plan. One place that I could move to is Rochester, where living would be a lot cheaper.

Q: A lot more snow!

Dr. Cohen: The good thing about climate change is that they don't get as much snow as they used to. (Wry laugh.) But it is pretty bad, they get the lake effect that's pretty nasty. It's squalls of weather that come off Lake Ontario. In the summertime it's a thunderstorm, in the wintertime it's a blizzard. But it can be very localized. Not really a retirement destination, but some people have retired there, just because the cost of living is preferable to the New York Metropolitan area.

[17:40]

But Montclair is my home, for better or worse. I'll probably be here for the duration, but I have kind of mixed feelings about Montclair: I've felt there's a lot of snobs here, even people that, are on the same wavelength as me politically, I found to be very narrow minded and unwilling to consider any variation in the party line.

Q: Can you give me an example of that?

Dr. Cohen: Let me see if I can remember a specific topic. We affiliated ourselves briefly with the Unitarian Church-- I'm Jewish, [my wife] was brought up a Baptist. So we tried twice, Unitarian Church, once when I was in graduate school, in Evanston, Illinois, and then when we moved here. And both times we felt we didn't really fit in with these people who were, like, very leftist and almost socialist. And we didn't really feel that far.

Personally, I'm a fiscal conservative, I mean, I don't borrow money. Our condo is doing a huge renovation of the atrium, and it's costing a six-figure sum, and I voted against it. I'm President of the Condo Board, and I voted against it. Because we have to borrow money to do this, and I didn't think we should do that.

[20:00]

So personally I'm not a big spender and also there are areas that I don't agree with everybody on the left. And both times that we tried to get next to these people, we didn't feel at home. So we've always felt very much not falling with any particular group, because of the religion thing, and because of, the political thing. I just didn't want to be pigeonholed.

Q: I was just wondering if you hit any kind of, if there was any stigma, any prejudice that came about because it was an interfaith marriage.

Dr. Cohen: Right at the very beginning, our parents were not thrilled with it, but, I have to say, I don't have any siblings, but I have, five first cousins, on the Cohen side, on the Jewish side, almost all of whom intermarried, you know. And some, and some were, ostracized, you know, their kids were dead to the parents, you know. My parents didn't do that, fortunately. Of course, after grandkids came along, they came around.

So, when I finally got to the point of, ah, looking for a permanent job, we decided not to go back to Rochester, because we didn't want our parents up in our business. But did they try to stop it, no. I mean, I remember my parents sent me to a rabbi to talk about this. My parents were always sending me to something, like when I wanted to be a musician, they sent me to this violinist down the street from our house, who was a total burnout. He played in the Rochester Philharmonic, and he hated the job, and he was just ready to retire, and he was a total burnout, and they sent me to him to talk me out of going into music as a career.

So, when the marriage thing came along—to a Gentile woman—they sent me to a rabbi, to see if (laughing) the rabbi could convince me not to make this decision. And, it didn't work out, but they didn't stop me or make a big fuss about it. One thing we did do, we sort of eloped, I mean, we didn't, you know, just go off without telling anybody. We told everybody, but we just went off and got married in a little town near the Vermont border, in upstate New York, where the family of one of my wife's roommates that lived on her dorm at school was a Justice of the Peace, and he married us. So we just went off and were married with a few people present, not our families. But it wasn't really an elopement.

We never really faced any discrimination, or any problems with regard to the marriage--until we got to Evanston, Illinois. We never had lived in the Midwest before. The first year, we still had New York State license plates. We had moved from Rochester, and we didn't get our plates changed right away... we didn't have any money. I had quit a job at Eastman Kodak [in Rochester] and decided to go back to graduate school at Northwestern. And although I had a teaching assistantship, and I didn't have to pay tuition, we weren't living on very much, so we neglected to have our license plates changed. One day we discovered a note left on our car, that said, "Get Illinois license plates or else. We don't like your kind."

[24:57]

Another, another experience we had was, there was a family that lived in our apartment building—mostly Northwestern graduate students. Another family there was from Michigan, they were Dutch Reformed, and one time the wife asked me, "Um, isn't it true that what happened to the Jews in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s was because they didn't accept Christ?" (Pause.)

So, that was only in Evanston. Then we moved to California, (laughing) everybody was divorced, I mean, you know, it was like, a catch-all, you know.

And we didn't have any trouble here. [in Montclair]

I mean if you look at our backgrounds, and so forth, you would say 'This ain't gonna last,' but we were married for 56 years.

Q: Congratulations.

Dr. Cohen: Thanks. We lived in Montclair longer than anywhere else. Neither one of us knew exactly what we wanted to do, we're both kind of loners. And we kind of spent our lives together just doing our thing. We made a lot of mistakes, I mean we didn't do a whole lot of research on things, we just did what we thought. Like, going back to graduate school with a four-month-old, quitting a job with benefits and salary... We didn't know what we were getting into. (Laughs.)

And here's another one: This involves the geography of the United States.

I finished my doctorate at Northwestern, and then I took a post-doctoral fellowship at Stanford University, so we drove to California. So, we drove I-90, the northern route. And this was like mid-September. We didn't know what we were running into.

So we got to Billingsley, Montana, okay? This is mid-September, and we were going to drive through Yellowstone National Park. We're going through the northeast entrance, which is Red Lodge, Montana. And we're going up this windy road, up up up up, and pretty soon it starts snowing. (Suppressed laugh.) And it was scary, you know! And finally we got up above about 10,000 feet... We had no idea we were going over the Continental Divide (more laughing...) And, and we got up there and finally we were looking down at the clouds...

Q: Wow!

Dr. Cohen: I mean that's the sort of planning we did, we didn't know what to expect. To me, California was West Coast jazz... Dave Brubeck, Jerry Mulligan (laughing): That was California to me. But it was good that we got to see other parts of the country. I wish we had done more traveling.

[30:00]

Q: Anything else you want to share with us? About Montclair? About your history? A story you want to share?

Dr. Cohen: One thing that's sad is, my wife Ann suffered from dementia. She was diagnosed in 2010, and we were very upfront about this, which was kind of a mistake, because people stopped visiting her. We really, got cut off-- some old friends, right from the very early days of 77 Orange Road--haven't been in touch and that makes me very sad. I'm so alone right now, it's kind of disappointing and surprising. You know, where did all these people go? The only person that still stays in touch is one of the ladies that worked for my wife.

Let me talk a little bit about the store.

So the store opened in 1984 on Church Street.

Q: [Mentions something about dolls]

Dr. Cohen: Yes! Across the street -- Dolls in the Attic came a little bit later, across the street in the apartment building, 45 Church Street. And Muffy Van der Bear, do you remember the little bears, with the outfits? Playmobile, Brio--

But the way the store [Toys in the Attic] came about was, my wife was a big bridge player. I never was, but, throughout our lives, she was always playing bridge.

And so, she was at bridge one night, this was in Montclair, and this was about 1984. And she got to talking with somebody at her table. And I think our older granddaughter had just been born, and they came to the conclusion that Montclair doesn't have any toy stores. We should start a toy store.

From that discussion at bridge, within five days, Ann had found a place and we're ordering inventory. So they opened. I mean it's crazy, she had kind of followed me around, you know, because I was the one that was destined to get the education, and so forth. She dropped out of school; that was the thing that most upset her parents. She dropped out of school to marry me.

When I was in graduate school, she went to work in the Chemistry Department, because we needed money. She got a job working in the Chemistry Department office and did very well.

[35:07]

She did very well, at this job, amongst many other things. I remember she was involved in shared childcare, they had some organization set up to share child care ... very inventive, and ingenious. I talk about women's equality --Man! *I* was the beneficiary of women's excellence, for 56 years. My wife was really very talented.

So she worked in the Chemistry Department; then she was a stay-at-home mom until about the 1970s, when she decided, our kids were older, and she wanted to do something. So she went to Katharine Gibbs [secretarial school] and got some kind of training in office management and secretarial work. She got a job with a defense consultant. An orthodox Jewish man, who worked out of his home, on Gates Avenue, I think it was. Ann had security clearance. And to this day, I have no idea what she (chuckling) might have worked on, you know. Hopefully it wasn't weapons of mass destruction.

But, she did very well there, you know. I guess she wasn't working for him anymore, when she decided to open the toy store. People loved that store because people would walk in: "Can I help you?" You don't get that in Toys R Us or Best Buy, or any of those places.

And she would gift-wrap, while you wait, and, shipped. You got to remember...thirteen years since she closed up...things have changed so much technologically...it's so much different now, but she did these things that at that time were very much appreciated. The store was very successful, and I was just amazed,

But, another thing she did was she mentored many of these women that would work for her; they were high school, and college kids. You know, Montclair High and probably Montclair State.

And, I never realized how much these young women appreciated the training. And advice that Ann provided to them.

It really came home [when] there was this article in the New York Times... I think it was the New York Times magazine section, a couple of years ago, Ann was still alive, and it was a woman that had worked for her, who is now a writer, actually a pretty well-known writer, I can't think of her name at the moment. But she wrote this article about her experience in this toy store. And, she didn't name the store, but it was clearly Toys in the Attic. And although I didn't remember her, Ann's partner did, remember her. And, she, (laugh) she referred to Ann in the article... I forgot what the term was, but it was something that if Ann had read this, she would have gone off on this person, because it was a little bit insulting.

But, [the article] was about how the experience she got working for this toy store. And she described the toys and so forth. It was more like an exercise in writing, than anything else. As far as Montclair is concerned, I mean, that was very much a part. Like I said, she was active in the [Montclair Center] BID, she was very close to Tom Lonergan, who was the head of the BID at that time; and spent a lot of time with that.

[40:28]

And the Chamber of Commerce. I remember she even got my band to play a Chamber dinner dance. Toys in the Attic and Dolls in the Attic, they were quite a significant,...

Q: (Breaking in): So were they, which, both were both of those stores hers?

Dr. Cohen: It wasn't just Ann. Ann and her partner, they both went in, on it, together. And then a few years later Dolls in the Attic opened in the apartment building. [The partner] moved over there, and Ann had the toy store.

Oh, and here's another thing: I remember we would go to Toy Fair, at the Javits Center... in February. The weather was always horrible. We'd take, take the ferry, and then we had to cross the West Side Highway to get to the Javits. And the wind was blowing, every year it was like that. But that was an interesting experience.

Q: I've heard that's a great show.

Dr. Cohen: It is, it's amazing. The store was really the focus of our lives for many years.

Like I say, [Montclair] is my home now, you know, and I think that whatever time I have left will probably be spent here.