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University of California
Berkeley, California

Mary K. Cohen

Rosie the Riveter WWII Home Front Oral History Project

Interview conducted by
David Dunham
in 2011

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Mary K. Cohen: "The Prettiest WAC," 1944



Mary K. Cohen with police officers and army colleagues, Mitchell Field, New York, 1944



Mary K. Cohen talking with some young men about benefits of being in the Army, 1944

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Interview #1 December 28, 2011

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01-00:00:04

Dunham: This is David Dunham on December 28, 2011, and I'm speaking with Mary Cohen in North Hollywood, California. This is interview one, tape one, for the Rosie the Riveter National Home Front Oral History Project. Thank you again, so much, for participating today. I'm really looking forward to talking to you this afternoon. Just to get started, can you tell us your full name and date of birth?

01-00:00:29

Cohen: I'm Mary Kaminsky Cohen. My birthday is July 31, 1923. I was born in Chicago, Illinois.

01-00:00:39

Dunham: In Chicago, Illinois.

01-00:00:41

Cohen: Right.

01-00:00:42

Dunham: Can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

01-00:00:46

Cohen: I was born in Chicago, and at the age of two my parents decided to move to New York City. Bronx, New York is where we settled. My father was a bagel baker. There were problems in Chicago, which I never found out more about it, about unionizing and stuff. They decided to get away and come to New York. I was sad in a way, because in later years, I realized we had so much family in Chicago and practically nobody in New York at all. Growing up, I think we would have had, as children we would have had a better life. There were five of us. I had two sisters and two brothers. One brother was born in Russia, which I didn't find out about until I was sixteen. He's my half-brother. My father was married in Russia, in Ukraine, and came to America for a better life. Left his wife and son there. During the time, there was a pogrom, and they shot his wife. She was holding the baby in her arms and dropped the child, which is my brother. Then he came to America and married my mother. I've heard that she's his first cousin, but I don't really know anymore. Everyone is gone now.

01-00:02:23

Dunham: His first wife or your mother?

01-00:02:26

Cohen: My mother, right. Then there were four more children after that. I know my brother was always shorter than the rest of us, but it never occurred to me that he wasn't my full—I never thought about that. At the age of sixteen, I found out that he was a half-brother.

01-00:02:48
Dunham:

How did you find out?

01-00:02:49
Cohen:

I found out because my mother, more than anything else, being she was not the biological mother, she wanted him to go to college and to have a better education. She felt she wanted to show the family, his family, my father's family, that she was doing everything right for him. He wouldn't go. He just said, "No, I don't want to go." So she started screaming. She said, "I've done everything I can to raise you." At that point, I suddenly understood what was going on. It was kind of a shock, but sixteen years later, it didn't seem to matter at that point. I don't think it would have mattered at any point, really. He did his own thing. He just marched to a different drummer and caused a lot of grief to my mother and my father. He took a different route. He's okay. He was okay. He's gone now. He got married and had a child, and he joined the Navy. He was okay. It's just kind of a strange—because, for whatever reason, I could never understand it. We had a very small apartment in the Bronx, and he had his own room. The rest of us slept in one room together, the rest of the siblings.

01-00:04:12
Dunham:

Including your parents, or the four siblings?

01-00:04:14
Cohen:

No, my parents slept on one side. I think we just had two bedrooms. The rest of us were sleeping all over the place, but Louis, my brother Louis, the one that was the half-brother, he had his own room. I could never understand it, but it never occurred to me that—but my mother wanted to show the family that she did right for him. She seemed to always want to prove it to them that she's a good mother, and apparently they—they didn't threaten her, but they felt that—what's she supposed to be? There was a lot of friction there. Anyway, the marriage lasted between my father and my mother.

01-00:04:56
Dunham:

Was your father's family in the New York area or Chicago or back in the Ukraine?

01-00:04:59
Cohen:

No, but they would come to visit. They were always in Chicago, but they'd come to visit all the time. I'd go there when I was about thirteen, fourteen. I would fly to Chicago—or take the bus. I wouldn't fly. It was too expensive. Then I'd meet some of the relatives, and they were very nice people. Mostly my father's family lived there. Brothers and sisters and grandfather, which I really never got close to. I got to know them by going there, but it was—I think I would have had a happier childhood had I been surrounded by family.

01-00:05:38
Dunham:

What was your childhood like growing up in the Bronx?

01-00:05:41

Cohen:

In the Bronx, the neighborhoods were kind of interesting. There were two long streets where there were all Jewish people. Then next to that there were Italian, and then next to that was Irish. So it was kind of a mixture of all the people. It was okay. You made your own friends. My mother and father, they were religious people. They were Orthodox, but not to the extent that I see some other people today, much more so. They kept a kosher home. We had the red soap to wash this and the blue soap for that. I stayed within that circle of religion. We went to the synagogue as children and ran all over the place because I was young. Everything changed when I went into the Army. I ate what they had, because in those days they didn't give you kosher food. Today, I understand they do, but in those days, that was not a choice. I just learned to eat everything. I got away a little bit from that period of my life.

01-00:07:02

Dunham:

We'll talk more about that when we get to talking more about your experience in the Army. In your neighborhood, you said there were a couple blocks of all Jewish. Were they mostly from Russia also, or did it vary?

01-00:07:14

Cohen:

Various, yeah. The older people were mostly from the area of Russia. Most of them were there.

01-00:07:22

Dunham:

Mostly first and second generation immigrants?

01-00:07:24

Cohen:

Right, right, right.

01-00:07:26

Dunham:

What was school like?

01-00:07:29

Cohen:

Almost all the teachers were Jewish. Even today, they still close for the Jewish holidays in New York City. It's on their calendars. So apparently there are still many Jewish teachers there. There was a mixture. There was never any feeling of anti-Semitism. There was nothing like that. We were living right across the street from one synagogue, and a block away there was another one. My first taste of anti-Semitism was Chicago, actually, when I went back to visit an uncle. I was fourteen. An uncle and aunt. He was driving me around Evanston and other pretty areas of neighboring towns. We came upon an area where there's a great big sign on the hill, and it said "No dogs allowed" and "No Jews allowed." I sort of looked at it, and I was so shocked because, in my mind—I was fourteen, but I just couldn't figure out why that sign. My uncle just—I asked him. I said, "Why do they do that? Why is it up there?" He said, "Don't worry about it." He didn't talk to me about it any further, but that was my first experience.

01-00:08:55

Dunham:

Did you talk to anyone else about it or did you just kind of set it aside?

01-00:08:58

Cohen:

No, I talked to my uncle. When I came back to New York, I told my family. I went to school, and I mentioned it to the teacher, and she started explaining how that exists in other areas. But I was never subjected to anything like that when I was growing up early years. Not too much afterwards either. When I was in the Army, I didn't have any problem.

01-00:09:28

Dunham:

Aside from not accommodating the kosher food.

01-00:09:31

Cohen:

Exactly. Not at all.

01-00:09:38

Dunham:

You mentioned there were Italians in the neighborhood. Were there other ethnicities as well?

01-00:09:42

Cohen:

They were mostly Italians and Irish. That was the biggest amount of people. We were very naïve. We were so uneducated as far as personal things. Everything was kept under the table. There weren't open discussions. I wouldn't think at all of going to my parents and asking a personal question or things that troubled me, like personal things. I remember the superintendent that was on our building was not Jewish. They were a Christian family. The young girl was eleven or twelve, and we were jumping rope, and then she had a problem, and she started bleeding. She didn't know what it was, and she used iodine, and she died of shock. It shows you that there was no communication between the parents—unless there was an older sister or somebody. I remember that. That was painful. Then my sister took me aside and told me what happened. No talking, no discussion, nothing.

01-00:11:06

Dunham:

Not with the parents, but you could some with your siblings?

01-00:11:09

Cohen:

Yeah, sometimes.

01-00:11:10

Dunham:

Where did you fall? I know you had the oldest brother, but where did you fall in your other siblings?

01-00:11:16

Cohen:

I was the middle one. I was the middle one. My oldest brother, the one that was born in Russia, and then my sister was two years older than myself. Then I was born after two years. Then a younger sister, and then a younger brother. Now, it has always troubled me, because my younger sister is completely blind. She lives in Israel now, and she sees nothing. Completely black, blindness. My older sister, who died, she was legally blind. Here I'm in the middle, so the doctors are kind of struggling to keep me okay. There's been a lot of progress made, so thank God. He does help me, the doctor I have now,

trying to preserve what eyesight I have. I do drive, but at night I have difficulty.

01-00:12:16
Dunham:

Oh, wow.

01-00:12:17
Cohen:

But at least I'm okay in that direction.

01-00:12:20
Dunham:

Was your other brother, your younger brother, affected?

01-00:12:22
Cohen:

The younger brother, that was kind of tragic. I don't think my mother wanted any more children from what I sort of hear about. She had four, and it was hard for her. She was struggling. There wasn't much money at all. Everything was old. When my father got a few dollars, he paid the butcher and the baker and everybody. My younger brother was born with a heart murmur, and my mother blamed herself for that because apparently she did something to try not to have that child. Whether that's true or not—this is just what I've heard. Consequently, he was okay, and he died last year. He was six years younger—six years younger?—than I am. I miss him a lot. I really do. In fact, it was so funny. He came here for a week to visit, and I wanted to take him all over. That week, it rained every single day. We had the biggest storm. It was horrendous. I was driving home from San Diego with him, and I got caught in a ditch. I drove sixty miles out of my way, and it was a nightmare. I had to call the highway patrol on a Sunday.

01-00:13:52
Dunham:

Did he stay in New York, in the Bronx, or where did he settle?

01-00:13:54
Cohen:

No, he lived in Brooklyn. He lived in Brooklyn. He died in Israel, though. He went to Israel to live with his daughter, who is very, very, very Orthodox. Very Orthodox. They weren't. He got there, and four days later he was dead. His wife died before that, earlier in the year or the year before, and they took her body to Israel because the one daughter lives there with eleven children. She's got eleven children. Many of them are married now. She lives very, near Jerusalem in a town called Telz-Stone, which is very, very, very Orthodox. Unlike the way I was raised. She was very Orthodox.

01-00:14:43
Dunham:

Have you been to Israel?

01-00:14:44
Cohen:

Forty-six times.

01-00:14:46
Dunham:

Oh, a few—yes.

01-00:14:47

Cohen:

Forty-six times. My son lives there, actually. He lives in Israel, so that's why I go often. People ask me if I know the language, but I only learn one word every time I go, so I know forty-six words. I'm just telling everybody that the first word I learned was called "ai foh ha-shirutim", which means "Where's the toilet?"

01-00:15:23

Dunham:

Okay, that's an important one.

01-00:15:24

Cohen:

That's an important one.

01-00:15:26

Dunham:

When you were growing up, did you learn Russian or Hebrew at all?

01-00:15:29

Cohen:

Nothing. My parents spoke Yiddish. My sisters and brothers were pretty good at it. I wasn't. I left home early, and I never really—but I understand a little bit. I understand. Speaking, I have problems, but I do understand some. It depends how fast you talk and how people talk. That was kind of a growing up—

01-00:15:58

Dunham:

You've mentioned that your family, the four siblings slept in the same room together. What was it like kind of growing up in the Depression? How did it affect your family?

01-00:16:07

Cohen:

I didn't really know it, because we had plenty to eat. My father would bring bagels every morning. I went to see where he worked. Both parents died; they were about fifty years old. My father worked in a place in the Bronx, and it was in a basement. In those days, they made bagels where you had to boil them, and then take them out of the boiling water, and then put them on long bars of wood, and then bake them. That's the way they were made then. Today, they make them like a roll. They're not the same. The working conditions were so horrible. They did an autopsy on him, and they said his body was like an eighty-year-old man because the kind of work he was doing. My mother died when I came home on my first furlough from the Army. My mother died suddenly. Then he wanted to commit suicide, my father. He didn't want to live anymore. So it was hard.

01-00:17:11

Dunham:

How did your mom die?

01-00:17:14

Cohen:

I came home on furlough. After basic training, I came home from Tucson. I was sent to Tucson, and I asked for a furlough just to see my family. I got in the house, and she was on the couch. My father said, "Don't worry about it. We washed the floor to get ready for your coming." She wasn't happy that I

joined the Army. She didn't know. Then a few days later, she was dead. In those days, the problem was, of course, the war was on, and she was in a big ward of a lot of people, about thirty-two patients in one ward. There wasn't anyone to administer oxygen, and so I think that probably made her dead much earlier. He didn't have any will to live after that. He really didn't want to live anymore. I had been in the Army, and my brothers and sisters said, "You've got to get out. You've got to help us. We've got to watch him. Put him on a twenty-four hour watch." Finally, I did ask my colonel if I could be transferred closer to New York from Tucson. She said, "No, probably you can't, because we have more dire need cases that have asked for transfers and they couldn't get it." So I said, "Well, I'd like to talk to the commanding officer that comes to visit once a month," and I did. They transferred me. I was so happy. They transferred me to New York, to Mitchel Field, which is Jamaica. I was able to get home. I had really no problem with that. I stayed on until the war was over, and then I got out.

01-00:19:02
Dunham:

Did your dad sort of recover some from the initial shock or he—

01-00:19:05
Cohen:

No, no, no.

01-00:19:06
Dunham:

—stayed despondent? How soon after did he pass?

01-00:19:11
Cohen:

Not too long after that. Probably not even a year. He was gone. He just didn't have any will to live after that. It was very sad. At that time, he had been sick. He had come to California to try to make a living here. I came out to see what I could do to help, and meanwhile he got sick and went back to New York. My mom said I could stay for a while, and that's when I joined the Army, when I was out here. So they didn't know until I got back there, and then I got my orders to report to Des Moines, Iowa.

01-00:19:50
Dunham:

Let's come back to that. It's interesting in terms of your parents' experiences. You mentioned about health care. I'm just curious. What was health care like when you were growing up? Do you remember going to the doctor—

01-00:20:05
Cohen:

It was so different. We did not get the proper health care for my mother because I know the doctor was just—she had diabetes, and he didn't treat her well at all. I had a lot of problems because I was the type of person that would run into the street. Once, I cut my leg open, the bottom of my foot, on a Coke bottle. I was about eight, nine years old. I heard them saying they were going to have to amputate the leg because it's gangrene. I don't know. I guess whatever happened, thank God, I was saved. Then another time I had double pneumonia. I almost died. My father was, from what I heard, just hitting himself on the head. He thought if I would die he'd just crack up. They didn't

have penicillin at that time for the general public. They just had it for military, they said. I was very young. So what they did is they took two ribs out.

01-00:21:21

Dunham: Oh my.

01-00:21:22

Cohen: They took two ribs out. Consequently, when I went to join the service, I went to the Marines, but they wouldn't take me because I had two ribs taken out. Then I went to the Navy, and the Navy wouldn't take me because of that. It's quite a gash on the side when they removed the ribs, but it was all full of pleurisy, they call it, or whatever. Pus or whatever. That was the only way they saved my life. Otherwise—

01-00:21:47

Dunham: Did that happen very often? Do you know of many others who had their ribs removed as a—

01-00:21:51

Cohen: At that time, probably, because they didn't have penicillin. If they had had penicillin then, they wouldn't have to do that.

01-00:21:57

Dunham: How old were you?

01-00:21:59

Cohen: I think I was about eleven.

01-00:22:01

Dunham: Were you hospitalized long, do you remember?

01-00:22:02

Cohen: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

01-00:22:05

Dunham: Was it during the school year?

01-00:22:06

Cohen: Yeah. It was kind of rough. Anyway, I begged the Army to take me, and the Army finally did.

01-00:22:15

Dunham: Talked them into it.

01-00:22:17

Cohen: It was really something. I felt so down because I really wanted to go in the service at that time.

01-00:22:30

Dunham: Backing up to your childhood, you told me you had your first job at eight years old. What was that?

01-00:22:34
Cohen: Eight years old, yeah. We had no money, so somebody was telling my mother, if you send one of your children over to pluck fresh chickens, kosher chickens, we'll pay three cents a chicken. Of course, three cents was a lot of money for us. That's what I did. I plucked chickens. I always remember this one man coming in, ordering three chickens, and he gave me a dime, which was a penny more, and I was so excited. I was so excited.

01-00:23:10
Dunham: This was someone you were working for that had the chickens?

01-00:23:12
Cohen: Yeah, it was in the neighborhood.

01-00:23:13
Dunham: In the Bronx?

01-00:23:15
Cohen: Right, right.

01-00:23:17
Dunham: Did they teach you how to do it?

01-00:23:19
Cohen: To pluck, yeah. In fact, when I go on a cruise sometimes, they have this program called What's My Line? I always go in on that. One year, I had the chicken between my legs, and plucked, plucked, plucked. They never were able to figure out what's my line.

01-00:23:38
Dunham: That's a stumper, huh?

01-00:23:39
Cohen: That was really kind of fun.

01-00:23:42
Dunham: Were you a tomboy growing up, would you say? You said running around. Just kind of adventurous?

01-00:23:49
Cohen: I don't know if I was a tomboy, but I was sort of my very own person. I did things that would aggravate my parents quite a bit. I sort of fell in love with an Italian guy on the train, and my mother almost had a heart attack with that.

01-00:24:10
Dunham: How old were you then?

01-00:24:12
Cohen: I had just started high school. She wasn't too happy about that.

01-00:24:16
Dunham: Because he wasn't Jewish?

01-00:24:17

Cohen:

Yeah, right, exactly. Then I fell in love with some guy in the Army. He wasn't Jewish. He had come from a German background, and the parents were very, very German. He was an only son. That would not have worked at all. I didn't want to hurt my parents, really, so I had to break it up. It was hard for me to break it up because he was a wonderful—a good man. I have a photograph you can see of him.

01-00:24:48

Dunham:

Sure, I would love to. When you were in high school in New York, did you have any particular ambitions or ideas of what you wanted to do with your life before the war?

01-00:24:59

Cohen:

At that time, I really didn't have very much. I was sort of interested in being a dietician. I thought that kind of sounded interesting. Getting people on good food. That was kind of unheard of in that period of our lives, but it sounded interesting. Finally, I transferred to another school to learn how to become a dietician, to try, but they were not equipped for that. They taught you how to make very nice dishes and pretty things to eat. I remember one time, they sent me to somebody's home when I was about fifteen, sixteen years old—sixteen—and they sent me to someone's home to help the woman making this very fabulous dinner. She had these little Jell-O molds for all her guests, and she told me to take them out of the mold. Well, unbeknown to me—I didn't know what the heck I was doing, so I put the molds in hot water. And of course they're all liquid. Then she was so disgusted with me because she couldn't serve them. They were like soup at that time. So she told me to go home. They gave me a couple jobs like that. I didn't think it was really dietician work, which I thought I would like. I don't know why I focused on that. It's just something that sounded interesting. In those days, we weren't too hepped up by nutrition yet, as we are now. That's why I think I joined the Army, because I just felt that maybe I could find something—and I loved flying. To me, I loved flying. I would have loved to have that. If I had my life to do over, I would definitely want to have a career pilot.

01-00:26:53

Dunham:

When did that start? When did you become so interested in flying?

01-00:26:57

Cohen:

That was early. That was when I was about fourteen. I was offered a job taking care of a couple of children out of Long Island. That, my parents didn't know about either. I just took off. He had an airplane, a Piper Cub aircraft, and he taught me how to fly. I got thirty-six hours, so I soloed. Then I got my license at the time, my pilot's license at sixteen.

01-00:27:32

Dunham:

This is in '39?

01-00:27:35

Cohen: Yeah, about that time.

01-00:27:36

Dunham: About '39 or so.

01-00:27:39

Cohen: That's right, yeah. Then I wanted to go further, but I didn't have the money for the lessons after that, so I couldn't go. I think it was about \$5 a half-hour or something like that to fly. We just didn't have that money at all.

01-00:27:54

Dunham: That's a lot at that time.

01-00:27:55

Cohen: That was something I really would have loved to do. It's something that's always in the back of my mind. I said, next time around, that's what I'm going to do.

01-00:28:10

Dunham: What do you remember about when you first heard of Pearl Harbor, the attack on Pearl Harbor?

01-00:28:17

Cohen: I think, like most people, it was such a shock that I felt, "I want to do something. I want to do something special." It was kind of interesting. I was looking at ads in the paper at that time to see what kind of work I can do. My sister was, too. She was two years older. We both wanted to get something to help the war effort. We saw an ad in the paper about working on aircraft on fighter planes. It was out in Linden, New Jersey. We both went out there. I always remember that was when women first started to wear pants, and it was not acceptable before, but for that. We interviewed for the job, and we both got hired. We didn't realize how much stress that would be, but we were young, so it didn't bother us at that time. But it was a very long trip. We had to take a trolley from the Bronx to the train, and then we got on the train, and then we had arrangements to go with a car, with a man. We had to pay all that. So we went out. It took us two-and-a-half hours each way to go. We both became riveters. We both became riveters on different parts. I mostly worked on the aileron. We had these long drills, and we would drill through to the aileron, and then we had to rivet them. We took turns. We had three shifts working around the clock, and we had to change shifts. I believe it was every month we had to change. We had to go from the day shift to graveyard to mid-shift. It didn't seem to bother us. We were young.

01-00:30:16

Dunham: Your same crew moved together?

01-00:30:18

Cohen: Right, right. The same crew moved on to the next shift, right.

01-00:30:21
Dunham:

Do you remember your first day on the job, what that was like?

01-00:30:24
Cohen:

Yeah, of course. They showed us around, and they showed us what we had to do and that we had to be very cautious with the drill, not to extend the drill. It has to be just one clear hole so we could put the rivet in there. It was very competitive. The shifts were very competitive. I was the fastest on my shift because I was really fast. But the other shift, we were always trying to do outdo each other. It didn't matter as far as the money. We just wanted to get these planes out. It was a very patriotic feeling.

It took its toll. I got sick once. I never even took time off. I just went in all the time. I never stopped. I never missed one day, never, as sick as I was. It was very challenging. It was very challenging. As far as promotions, my supervisor wanted to change the job for me, wanted me to do something else. But I really liked what I was doing, and I became very, very good at it. I felt that this is where I'm best at and I can get the planes out faster. It was very interesting. Like I said, I think the competition made you fight harder. The fact that you knew that you're fighting the next shift, that you want to be better than they are. You wanted to really produce. We got so involved in trying to get the war over with, which was a long time before it was over, but for us, we were thinking we're helping it. I think that's what kept us going, was the drive and ambition of trying to—we were all so bitter and hurt as to what happened to our country. I've been a very patriotic person. Very patriotic. I think more so at that point, that's where it became, and this is what changed my life completely, by being attacked the way we were. Especially we were told they're not going to attack us, nothing is going to happen, and of course, we were. I think most of us felt that way. Most of the people came from a closer area, like Elizabeth, Perth Amboy, but my sister and I, I think, came one of the furthest area to travel.

01-00:32:56
Dunham:

And you continued that two-and-a-half hour commute during your entire tenure there? Wow. How much did it cost to the different segments?

01-00:33:05
Cohen:

I don't think it was that expensive. I think it probably was five cents. The train was five cents. I forget what we paid the driver, but the driver was the most expensive.

01-00:33:16
Dunham:

Was the two of you alone with the driver—I mean, that commuted, or was there more of you that commuted together?

01-00:33:21
Cohen:

No, just the two of us came from the Bronx. I think we went the longest distance. I think we came the longest distance. Others came from different parts of New Jersey, but I think my sister and I came the longest distance.

When you're young, you don't have to think about it. You just do it, and you get up early, and you've got to change shifts. We were just always on. We were always on. There was just no time for recreation. There was no time for recreation. When they asked us to work overtime, we did. We did whatever they said had to be done.

01-00:34:00

Dunham: Do you remember what you were paid?

01-00:34:02

Cohen: I think I made about \$65 a week. That was a lot of money.

01-00:34:12

Dunham: What were you doing with your money at that point?

01-00:34:15

Cohen: Mostly I gave it to my parents because they were not doing well. I don't think I saved it. I don't think I even had a savings. I just handed it over to my mom. We lived at home, and that's where I felt—this way, my mother was able to buy better cuts of meat and pay for it instead of—because she knew she was being ripped-off a lot of times when she'd buy stuff and they'd put it on little pieces of paper. At the end of the week, she'd pay them, but she never really was able to conceive actually what they charged for things.

01-00:34:50

Dunham: Now, why was that, or how was that?

01-00:34:51

Cohen: I think possibly the fact that she was from a foreign country. She spoke English. My parents spoke English. But I think it was just a matter that they didn't have the money at the time. Everything was bought on time. If they wanted a piece of furniture or a bed or a chair, you paid it out.

01-00:35:11

Dunham: Could they read English, or was that a problem that could be taken advantage of?

01-00:35:14

Cohen: I think they mostly read the Forward, the Jewish paper, but I think they did read English. They both became citizens. I know that.

01-00:35:26

Dunham: You mentioned a sense of nationalism and the country being attacked. Was there also a sense around your Jewish heritage and what was going on in Europe—

01-00:35:37

Cohen: No, actually—

01-00:35:38

Dunham: How much knowledge did you have of that?

01-00:35:38

Cohen: I knew nothing. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

01-00:35:42

Dunham: When did you first learn of that?

01-00:35:44

Cohen: Much later. Absolutely nothing. I had no idea that this was going on. I might have taken a different turn at that point. I might have gone to Israel or whatever, but everything was kept very quiet. I don't think my parents knew either. I don't think many people did.

01-00:36:04

Dunham: How did you get news of the war? Where did you hear about the war? From movie newsreels or the radio? Did you listen to the—

01-00:36:14

Cohen: We went to the movies a lot when we had a break. They had cartoons and the movies and the newsflash. We had a lot of that. Maybe it was sort of an escape to break it up. We went at least once a week. We got all these flash reports. I don't remember anything really listed about the Holocaust or what was going on with the Jewish people at the time.

01-00:36:45

Dunham: I think, obviously, it was much more known later.

01-00:36:47

Cohen: Yeah, much later.

01-00:36:50

Dunham: What do you remember about the movie theaters you went to? Do you remember some of the theaters themselves?

01-00:36:57

Cohen: That was the nice part of the life. We took the train to Broadway, and I remember we went to the Roxy or the Paramount. I think it was ten, fifteen cents, or twenty cents. There we had a big stage show. Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey, and all the big bands, all the big band—

01-00:37:20

Dunham: That you saw live?

01-00:37:21

Cohen: Yeah. Oh, yeah. We would go to the movies for about ten, twenty cents, and we would stay for the stage show, and then watch the movie, and then stay for another stage show. It was so beautiful. I remember going to Radio City Music Hall. That was forty cents at the time. It was just so spectacular. It was such an uplifting—it just made you feel good, all that big band music. I still love it. To me, it's so exciting listening to it. So many big bands that I just love until today. Every time I hear them, I get very excited to listen to them.

One of the most exciting moments is when they came out of the pit, playing their theme song. All this brass, which was just beautiful. Just beautiful.

01-00:38:20

Dunham: Had you enjoyed music growing up before then? Ever played an instrument?

01-00:38:25

Cohen: No, I never played an instrument. We never had anything in the house. As an adult I said, if God had given me the gift of the best musician in the world or the best linguist in the world, I would pick linguist. I'd love to be able to go into a country, which people do, spend three or four months, and pick up the language. I can't do that. I think that is such a gift. That is such a gift. Playing music is wonderful. I see people here that play keyboard and other music, and it's wonderful. But language, to me, would be wonderful to know how to— but it was an interesting part of—.

01-00:39:15

Dunham: What kind of training did you receive? I know we talked about your first day on the job, but did you have any training program, or was it on-the-job training?

01-00:39:22

Cohen: Yeah, we did. Actually, they brought us in, I remember, the first week, and they showed us what part of the plane we were going to be working on, and they showed us how careful we have to be, not only riveting, but also getting the holes—not to elongate them, because the rivets have to sit perfect. We were watched under inspectors for probably a couple of days until they saw that we could—some of us were faster learners than others. Then we were let go. Then we just put the plane right out there.

01-00:40:01

Dunham: When did you apply for the job, you and your sister?

01-00:40:13

Cohen: I applied for the job—I was about eighteen. Yeah. Yeah.

01-00:40:20

Dunham: So '42?

01-00:40:21

Cohen: Yeah. It was just the beginning of—

01-00:40:22

Dunham: So very early on. Were there many women who were—what was the makeup of your workforce?

01-00:40:30

Cohen: At that time, I remember there were—I'd say about 25 percent women, 25 percent women at the most. At the most.

01-00:40:38

Dunham:

How did the men and women get along? We've heard some stories, particularly early in the war, of men giving women a pretty hard time.

01-00:40:46

Cohen:

Well, yeah. At that time, during that period of my life, I remember they just thought they were better, the men. They thought they were better than we are. However, from what I understand from my supervisors most of us did just as fast work as they did. There was some friction because they felt superior, but you had to deal with that. I had to deal with that in the Army, too, to a degree.

01-00:41:19

Dunham:

Was there any kind of, with this new thing of men and women kind of working together in this environment, any kind of hanky-panky or people getting together? Was there dating? Fraternization?

01-00:41:32

Cohen:

It's a funny thing. We didn't have too much of the attitude that we have to be together. My sister and I particularly, we had such a long way to go, we never had time to fraternize with the men. They did a lot. Some of the women did. They went out for beer afterwards, but we couldn't do that. We had to meet the driver. In New Jersey, there's at least one bar on every street corner. Tremendous. At that time, loads of bars. Had we lived in that area, we probably would have had a lot more fun, the time off, but we had to meet our ride, and everyone was kind of anxious to get home because we had a full day the next day. And we worked long hours sometimes. Sometimes they kept us there quite long. It wasn't fun and games, let's put it that way. It was just intense work. We just got the fun out of knowing that we were doing something to help the war effort. That was important.

01-00:42:39

Dunham:

What models of planes were you working on?

01-00:42:41

Cohen:

I worked only on the fighter planes. I thought they were the F-14. I had a picture of it somewhere, but I don't know what I did with that. But it's a fighter plane. It's one of the fighter planes.

01-00:42:54

Dunham:

I had read that there were two divisions in New Jersey of General Motors. Eastern Aircraft and Grumman. Is that—

01-00:42:59

Cohen:

Yeah. Grumman.

01-00:43:01

Dunham:

You worked with Grumman, okay.

01-00:43:01

Cohen:

Grumman. That's the one, yeah. That's the one.

- 01-00:43:03
Dunham: You mentioned the competition between the shifts. Was there any competition between Eastern and Grumman, or were they pretty separate?
- 01-00:43:10
Cohen: They were separated. They were separated. There wasn't too much there. I'm glad you mentioned Grumman. That came right back to me. Yeah, the Grumman, right.
- 01-00:43:19
Dunham: The shift competitions, was it measured in quantity of how many planes?
- 01-00:42:25
Cohen: Yeah, because it depends on how many—like I said, I mostly worked on the aileron of the plane. It depends how many you get done. You work on it yourself. There was tremendous competition.
- 01-00:43:43
Dunham: Had you always been a competitive person, or did this sort of bring it out?
- 01-00:43:46
Cohen: Always, always, always. I still am.
- 01-00:43:52
Dunham: Did you ever have to challenge your team, or was everybody else on your team close to as competitive as you were?
- 01-00:43:58
Cohen: Not quite, not quite. Some people weren't. There was another girl, and she and I were very competitive with each other. I beat her out all the time. We became very good friends. In fact, there was a big storm one night, and I stayed over her house. So we got to be friends. Even though we were competitive working on the planes, we were still friends. But there was that friction. There was a little friction.
- 01-00:44:28
Dunham: Was it an assembly line that you were working on, or how did it work?
- 01-00:44:32
Cohen: No, not really. No. No, because when I finished one aileron, they moved it over and I got another one. I got another—
- 01-00:44:40
Dunham: You weren't held up by anybody else. You could just do as many as you could. Okay.
- 01-00:44:44
Cohen: No, there was no stoppage. No stoppage at all.

01-00:44:47

Dunham: Was it a pretty rare occasion where the weather prevented you from getting back home or something?

01-00:44:53

Cohen: Yeah, because winter, it was cold. There were days that were really very rough. Very, very rough.

01-00:44:59

Dunham: Were you ever unable to get to work because of it? I know you said you came even when you were sick.

01-00:45:05

Cohen: One time, the driver didn't show up, so that was a problem. We stayed out there, and someone came along. We contacted them. We didn't have cell phones in those days. Someone came to pick us up, so we were able to make that shift. It was rough. We talk about winter, and ice and snow and all kinds of weather conditions. New York, too. In the Bronx, where I lived, they pretty well cleaned up streets, but other areas were pretty rough. They weren't coming right away to clean up. So there were times that were very, very hard to get in, but we did it, though. We did it. I don't know how. I often wonder how we fought through that storm to do it.

01-00:45:47

Dunham: Yeah. Well, all of it is remarkable. You mentioned about women starting to wear pants. Were there fashion changes happening during the war? Were women wearing pants outside of work as well?

01-00:45:58

Cohen: No. Actually, people stared at us, really. Even in the subway, people looked at us.

01-00:46:04

Dunham: Because you had your outfit, your work outfit, on?

01-00:46:05

Cohen: Yeah, yeah, they really looked at us like, "Wow." Like we're going to church in pants or something. They really thought we were beneath them. I don't know.

01-00:46:16

Dunham: What was that like? What did that feel like? Because you were proud to be going to do this work, and—

01-00:46:21

Cohen: I know, but it just wasn't done. You just didn't wear pants then. Women looked us over. Men kind of stared at us, too. When we were traveling on the subway, we always were stared at. We felt so uncomfortable because we knew what they were staring at, that we shouldn't be wearing pants. We don't belong in pants.

01-00:46:40

Dunham: Did you kind of want to tell them why?

01-00:46:43

Cohen: Yeah. Well, I don't know. We just were so annoyed. But they just felt, so what if you're working in a plant? So what? You still could wear a dress and look decent. One woman told us that.

01-00:46:58

Dunham: Oh, really? Did you say anything?

01-00:47:00

Cohen: One woman, she told us that. She said, "You still can dress like a lady. You're not dressed like a lady." I said, "Yeah, but we're working on machines." She just walked away. People are focused one way. You can't change their mind. I was about to try. Because it was so much more comfortable. You have to bend and you have to—it's so—

01-00:47:26

Dunham: All the women who worked there did wear pants while working.

01-00:47:28

Cohen: Yeah, the ones that wanted. They could wear something else, but it was so much easier to bend down and pick up the drills. You had to use these long drills. It was so much easier working with them than if you wore a dress, because it would—and you don't want the dress to be caught into the drill or into the machinery, because then you could have a real problem.

01-00:47:52

Dunham: Yeah. What types of injuries did occur on the job?

01-00:47:58

Cohen: If you had your hand too close to the drill, you could cut off a finger or cut your finger. One time, I had a situation where I was trying to back up something in the back of the aileron, and I had my finger too close, so I cut a finger. But it wasn't serious. They just put a band-aid on it. But you've got to be careful of those drills, because they're—and you're going very, very fast. You're moving fast. There wasn't too much danger with the riveting. It was more the drills, the long drills to drill the holes through. The riveting was kind of interesting, how it goes in and then you squish it down. It was kind of interesting. You worked very fast. You get to the point where you know what you're doing, and as long as you stay alert—there were some accidents, I know, because a couple of times I didn't see someone there, and they said they had a little accident, some accident. If you're not careful—you're working with sharp objects, so you've got to be very, very cautious.

01-00:49:11

Dunham: Did you know of some serious accidents, or any deaths even?

01-00:49:15

Cohen:

No. Not that I remember. There weren't anything very serious at all.

01-00:49:21

Dunham:

Was there health care on site? Did the company have health care?

01-00:49:26

Cohen:

Not that I know of, no. There was one time I did see an ambulance coming. I know that. But what happened, that was another department, a different department that was doing some other work on the same aircraft. We all were Grumman. They hauled this guy away. What happened, I never found out, because, like I said, we were so busy. In fact, when we took a break, which was a very short break at that time—I think it was about ten minutes they allowed us at that time. There was no hard-and-fast rule of time. We had so much for lunchtime. We didn't have an hour. We had to get back to work. This was really fast-moving type of operation. It was not a slow-moving operation. Like I said, it was competitive and it was exciting. It was exciting because you felt you were doing something important. Those planes were very important, those fighter planes.

01-00:50:28

Dunham:

Sure. Did you see much of the sort of Rosie the Riveter iconography, or hear any of the songs during that time? Or at the movies, did you see anything about it ever?

01-00:50:39

Cohen:

Not during that time. Later, later. Later. Later.

01-00:50:43

Dunham:

After the war or later in the war?

01-00:50:45

Cohen:

Later in the war, yeah. Now, in fact, I went to Madison, Wisconsin, and they have a big display of Rosie the Riveter in their Veterans Museum. It's amazing, beautiful.

01-00:50:58

Dunham:

Oh, wow. I haven't been there.

01-00:50:58

Cohen:

That general holding up the Army.

01-00:51:03

Dunham:

During the war, later in the war, when you saw—

01-00:51:05

Cohen:

We had to keep our hair covered, that's right, so that our hair doesn't get—some people had long hair, and it could get caught into the drill or into the—so that, you had to keep covered. I had long hair at that time. You had to be very cautious. They gave you kind of a drill at the beginning, before you started work, as to what you had to be cautious about. You had to take it

seriously, because they knew what had to be done. So we did. You can't have your hair flowing around because you could get it caught into one of the machines.

01-00:51:42

Dunham: Were there any women who had a harder time adjusting to that that you noticed?

01-00:51:46

Cohen: About the hair?

01-00:51:47

Dunham: Yeah, or any aspects of it.

01-00:51:49

Cohen: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

01-00:51:50

Dunham: Some who kind of didn't stick with it, maybe. Kind of tried it for a little bit and didn't.

01-00:51:58

Cohen: They resented it. Some of them had long, pretty hair, and they resented having to cover it up. Some of them would take off their nets, and their supervisor would come around and tell them that that can't be, because they'll end up in the hospital somewhere. So they covered it up while the supervisor was watching, and then they'd take it off again. We weren't—at least I wasn't there to become a fashion plate. I was there to do a job. I was glad to get home. I was very, very tired. Even as young as I was, and I had a lot of energy, still, it was a long day. Long day. Traveling.

01-00:52:45

Dunham: How did your parents feel about you and your sister working there? Did they have any concerns?

01-00:52:49

Cohen: They were okay with that. They were okay. It helped them out a lot. I know we didn't make that much money. Like I said, about \$60, \$65 a week.

01-00:53:00

Dunham: But that was a lot at that time.

01-00:53:02

Cohen: A lot at that time. It certainly helped my parents very much at that time. It helped them buy the things, if they needed a new bed or whatever they needed. They didn't have to scrounge around, and they had the extra money to work with. They felt it was an honest job. They were very honest people, and they felt it was a good job and an honest job at helping the U.S. That was their thought.

- 01-00:53:30
Dunham: You said you had probably the longest commute, at two-and-a-half hours each way. Were there people coming from other parts of the country, moving to New Jersey for the job?
- 01-00:53:40
Cohen: No. I think they set up a lot throughout the country at different places. Like I said, most of them that I met that were on my shift were from the New Jersey area.
- 01-00:53:53
Dunham: How did New Jersey compare with your experience growing up in New York? The folks you met from New Jersey. Were there noticeable differences?
- 01-00:54:00
Cohen: No. The friends that I made were people that—like growing up in New York. We had a little more exposure in New York as far as activities and theater, things like that. They kind of said, “Wow, you’re lucky. You go to the theater, you go to the movies, you go to see stage shows.” At that time, we all heard of the famous swing bands, so they kind of envied us. We didn’t have that much time, but we did, at least once a week, we would go to see a—and the movies, they had double features and about four, five cartoons. You sit there all day.
- 01-00:54:47
Dunham: And the newsreel.
- 01-00:54:47
Cohen: You sit and and enjoy.
- 01-00:54:49
Dunham: Then the live music. Was that just certain theaters that had that, or all the theaters had the live music?
- 01-00:54:54
Cohen: Down in Broadway, all the theaters. Broadway. The Roxy, the Paramount. All live stage shows. They have a juggler or singers. It really was quite lively. Beautiful. I still like to go back. I love New York. I think if I had lots and lots of money I would get an apartment right overlooking Central Park and live right there.
- 01-00:55:23
Dunham: At the shipyards in Richmond, sometimes they had lunchtime concerts or things. I know you said you kept your lunches short. Did they ever have any type of that, or any type of celebration signifying the number of planes done?
- 01-00:55:37
Cohen: We did. When the planes took off and they were okay, they tested them, we had a party. They would have a party for the whole shift. Not the whole time, but during a break or something, they’d have a nice, big cake they’d bring in. One time they brought lollipops. We all applauded when the planes took off.

They were just beautiful to watch. When you work on these planes and they take off. Some of them, there were some accidents, and that was horrible, but for the most part, almost all the planes took off and they were just perfect. The engines and everything. It was a good feeling.

01-00:56:25

Dunham:

An amazing number of planes created there to help war effort. You mentioned some accidents. What types of things happened with the accidents?

01-00:56:33

Cohen:

There were some training planes that went up, and they blew up for whatever reason. They did an investigation on them. I don't know. I remember two of them that did that, that had that. They had to be taken up. They're test pilots. I thought, "Gee, I'd like to be a test pilot." I thought I'd like to do that. But it's a risk. It's a big risk. You're testing a plane. There could always be something that goes wrong. Fortunately, we didn't have too many, thank god. The two that I saw, the pilots were both killed. I'm sure they had a parachute. I'm not sure. But I do know that it was very devastating to see that happen.

01-00:57:27

Dunham:

Of course. But many more successes, successful planes.

01-00:57:30

Cohen:

Exactly.

01-00:57:31

Dunham:

You mentioned you'd had a passion for flying and considered that. Did you pursue that at all, about maybe being a test pilot? Was that opportunity available to you at all?

01-00:57:44

Cohen:

No. Even today, I just finished book about WASPs—about the military. A wonderful book.

01-00:57:56

Dunham:

We have an interview with a woman, Maggie Gee, who was a member.

01-00:58:00

Cohen:

Even today—I fly a lot. I have never, never had a woman pilot. I've had copilot, but not a woman pilot. This is today. Now, I should remember, too, that many of the men coming out of service that have served their time become pilots. They're pilots in the military, and they're pilots in the private industry. Women have very few opportunities. I'm sure there are women out there that would love to fly and try to fly, but they're rejected for whatever reason.

01-00:58:43

Dunham:

When you were back getting those lessons when you were sixteen, did your mother and father know?

01-00:58:48

Cohen: No.

01-00:58:51

Dunham: Would they not have approved?

01-00:58:53

Cohen: No, they would not have approved. They'd be afraid I'd be killed or something.

01-00:58:57

Dunham: Did they ever find out?

01-00:58:59

Cohen: Later, much later. Much later.

01-00:59:01

Dunham: Were they surprised?

01-00:59:05

Cohen: It was just like when I joined the Army. They had no idea. I was in California.

01-00:59:13

Dunham: Let me just stop the tape, because we're just about to end with this tape, so before we start on that. Sorry to interrupt.

Begin Audio File 2 cohen_mary_02_12-28-11.mp3

02-00:00:08

Dunham: Okay, this is tape two with Mary Kaminsky Cohen, on December 28, 2011, with the Rosie the Riveter Oral History Project. I definitely want to hear about when you went to join the Army. Before that, I just had a couple other questions. I know we said the workers at General Motors were predominantly from New Jersey. I don't think I asked, though, what was the ethnic makeup of the crews? Was there much diversity? Were there other people of Jewish descent?

02-00:00:42

Cohen: Not too many, no. There weren't very many Jewish people at all. In fact, I think I met one or two other men, and the rest were all Christian people. Let's put it that way. There were no Hispanics or Indian or Asian. There were none at all. There were none at all. It was all different denominations of Christianity, the ones that I met. When I stayed over a weekend, because the storm was so bad, I went with the girl to church. I remember that. There weren't too many Jews living out in that area. I think there were just one or two other men that I met. There was one other lady, that came from Perth Amboy. Those were the only ones I remember of the Jewish faith. The others were—I think, from what I've seen—they go to church and stuff. So the others were all of the Christian denominations. Catholic and Protestant and Lutheran or whatever. That's most of the people that are there.

02-00:02:11

Dunham: Did your sister engage in the work as much as you did and enjoy the competition?

02-00:02:19

Cohen: She wasn't quite as competitive, but she did. She really liked it. She got kind of tired of it after a while, more so than I did. She hung in there until we both left. I don't remember exactly what date that was, but she did, she hung in with me. We both knew that the family needed help. We sure did both help out. She was dating someone at the time. In fact, the person she married eventually. So she was more involved in that scene, which I was not.

02-00:02:57

Dunham: You weren't dating at all at that time?

02-00:02:59

Cohen: No, not at all.

02-00:03:00

Dunham: Had you dated in high school at all?

02-00:03:02

Cohen: Just this Italian fellow, which my parents didn't know about.

02-00:03:08

Dunham: Did that come to a stop when they found out?

02-00:03:11

Cohen: No, I never told them. I just met him on a train, and I'd say I have to go shopping or I want to go to the store. It wouldn't have sat right with them at all.

02-00:03:24

Dunham: Did you think it had a chance of becoming something more, or did you know it was just—

02-00:03:28

Cohen: No, no. Not as long as they were alive. We were in a situation where you didn't hurt your parents. You did not hurt them. No. This is what happened with this young man that I met in the Army. He was a wonderful guy. I loved him and he was so dear. However, I don't think it would have worked, because his parents were anti-Semitic, and I found that out. So I don't think it would have worked out. He was an only son. However, I did look him up after my husband died about three, four years ago, and I found out he died just a week before I finally found him.

02-00:04:13

Dunham: Oh my goodness. Wow.

- 02-00:04:14
Cohen: A week before. I don't know whether his wife had died first. Shortly after my husband died, I should have tried to reach him, but I didn't know how to do it.
- 02-00:04:28
Dunham: Because you hadn't been in contact with him since when you broke it off in the Army?
- 02-00:04:31
Cohen: No. He was shipped out. I would have loved to have seen him all these years later. It would have been amazing. It would have been an amazing experience. Even if he had been still married or whatever, it would have been an amazing experience.
- 02-00:04:48
Dunham: You said you found out his parents were anti-Semitic. Did he tell you that, or how did you find out?
- 02-00:04:54
Cohen: Actually, what happened is that he wanted me to come over for some occasion, for dinner. They said that they don't have any room for me. Something like that. So I asked Frank—his name is Frank Miller. Very common name. There were a thousand—
- 02-00:05:18
Dunham: That must have been challenging to find him.
- 02-00:05:21
Cohen: I said, "I don't understand." He said, "Well, they don't like Jewish people." He said, "But I love you very much. I wouldn't worry about it." Well, sure, don't worry about it, but I mean, come on. He's close to the family. He's close to them, his parents. I knew it would not be a working—and it would hurt my parents. It would hurt them very much.
- 02-00:05:54
Dunham: Was it shortly after that that you broke it off?
- 02-00:05:57
Cohen: He was shipped overseas. He was shipped out. He was shipped out. That was the end of it. That was the end of it. But I was sorry I didn't stay in touch, because even today, during the Gulf War, I sent packages to three soldiers, and I'm still in touch with one of them. I have a letter from him. It's remarkable what I mean to him as a person. He's married and has a family. He's Christian. Lives in Florida. I went to see him.
- 02-00:06:30
Dunham: Oh, wow. That's great.
- 02-00:06:32
Cohen: I didn't know who he was. I didn't know who to look for at the airport, and I finally saw a man standing with a rose in the corner. I asked him, and he was

the one. He took me to meet his wife, and we spent the week. He took off a week work.

02-00:06:49

Dunham: That's terrific.

02-00:06:50

Cohen: He's a retired military. We've been friends since the Gulf War. The other two, I lost touch with. One of them was divorced and having problems, and the other one I just lost touch with. But this one, I still email and we write to each other, Christmas cards. He keeps asking me to come back and spend another week. I might, one of these days. It's kind of fun.

02-00:07:15

Dunham: Yeah, that's really nice. We talked a little bit about the fashion change, although—during the war, as the war went on, did you see more women wearing pants? Did it become a little more normal?

02-00:07:29

Cohen: Yeah. Later on, yeah. Well, no. I worked for the state of California, and I remember we had a very strict manager. A girl came in with a pantsuit, a very lovely pantsuit, and he told her—this was much later. This was when I'm in California already. He said to her, "You cannot wear pants. You go home and change." She wouldn't do that. She just took her pants off and just left her jacket on. That's exactly what she did.

02-00:08:05

Dunham: Oh my. What was the response?

02-00:08:06

Cohen: In her underpants and the jacket, and that was it.

02-00:08:09

Dunham: What was the response to that?

02-00:08:11

Cohen: He tried to send her home. She was wearing a jacket. She wasn't wearing pants. But that was okay with him, apparently. She had gorgeous legs. I don't know. But even then—no, it took a long time. It really took a very long time before it was acceptable. Now we don't even think about it. But there are still places—if I'm invited somewhere, to a church party or some other function, and I don't know what the protocol is, I would wear a dress, because that can never be wrong. However, if you wear pants and everybody is wearing dresses, then it's a little uncomfortable. So if I don't know if there's a dress code or not, I'd rather wear a long skirt or something like that. I would feel much more comfortable. Walking in and wearing the only pants, I think, would bother me. Maybe bother others, too. I don't know. But it would bother me.

02-00:09:10

Dunham: Interesting.

02-00:09:12

Cohen: It was really funny. We're talking about within the last twenty years that people were still—it was objectionable to some people. I don't think today anymore.

02-00:09:27

Dunham: Yeah. Not, at least, with younger generations, I don't think.

02-00:09:30

Cohen: Although there are people here in the building, too, I see them always wear long skirts or dresses or something. They like to dress that way. I think it's so much more comfortable wearing pants.

02-00:09:42

Dunham: My wife feels that way very much so. What other types of changes did you notice in New York during the war, over the course of the war?

02-00:09:54

Cohen: Once I went into the service at the time, my hardest part was when I got out, because I didn't really know what I was fit to do. I didn't have a background. I didn't have anything concrete to go to. I had no idea. I know I had to work. I had to get a job. So I went to a department store, which is like Macy's here, a chain in New York, called Alexander's. I asked for a job in personnel. I thought that might be something, because I was working—when the war was over and I was working in the separation department, where people were discharged, and I was helping the men and women with forms, and getting rid of their clothes, what they didn't want or whatever. I figured that's working with people, so maybe that would work. I went and asked for a job like that. I said, something in personnel. At that time, I didn't really know what category of personnel they would put me in, but the employment manager there said, "We'll put you in the office and you can help us filing forms." I didn't think it sounded too terribly exciting, but I thought, it's a job. So I took the job. I was there maybe not even a week. It was very boring, but it was a job.

The president of the company, Mr. Farkas his name was, he came in one day and he took a look at me and he said, "What is a pretty girl like you doing in an office? I don't think you should be in an office. I would like to bring you into the store to train you to become somebody else, in clothing, some department." I said, "Whatever you want to do. I don't know. I don't know what I want to do." He said, "Well, we're going to do that." That's what he did. He brought me into the store and I became a trainee in the women's misses' maternity department. Then he became my mentor. He was watching my career. He was very close and very careful. One day, he changed something in the department. He said, "I think if you do this, it would look much nicer." I said, "Okay, we're going to do that." The next morning, he said to my merchandise manager, who's way above me, he said, "Who did that?"

He said, “Oh, Mary Kaminsky did.” He said, “I think she should be made assistant manager.” So you see what he did, he pushed my career. I was sent to Paris a few times. I became a buyer, a ready-to-wear buyer, for women’s misses’ maternity dresses. I became very successful. In 1952, I was already in California. I was married and had a child. I went back to see him, to visit, and he offered me \$50,000 a year to come back, in 1952. I wanted to come back. I said, oh my god. But my husband, he hated the cold weather, and he said, “No, I don’t want to go back.” So of course I never went back, but it was very tempting. I don’t know what that kind of money would be today, but it would be a lot. I was really excited about that.

02-00:13:43

Dunham: Let me pause for just a second. Your microphone is brushing a little—

02-00:13:46

Cohen: Oh, it—

02-00:13:48

Dunham: I wanted to ask just a last couple things about your career at Grumman. You mentioned this chain of jobs that you had later, after the war. It reminded me of something I didn’t ask about before. You said there was someone who wanted to promote you at one point. You wanted to stay doing the drilling and riveting, which you were so good at and felt was such a contribution. I was just curious, what was the offer that you had?

02-00:14:14

Cohen: The offer was supervisor.

02-00:14:19

Dunham: You knew that you had the most value actually getting work done—

02-00:14:21

Cohen: I would have had to work different hours, and my sister would be—we would travel separate. Which didn’t bother me that much. That would have been okay, but I would have had to try to arrange different transportation, and there were too many problems involved. I was already set. The difference in salary at the time, I remember, was not that great. Not that great. They said that I had an opportunity for better, if I hang in with that job, but I felt that I just wanted to help the war effort, and this was my way of doing it, and I was happy with that. Although I think it might have brought me a great deal of pride and increase in money, now as I look back. I think as I look back, I should have taken the opportunity. I think it would have been a challenge.

02-00:15:16

Dunham: Do you remember about how long into your working there that you got that offer?

02-00:15:23

Cohen: It was about, I think, three months. Just three months early. I remember exactly, it was almost three months later.

02-00:15:31
Dunham: How long did you work there, all told?

02-00:15:34
Cohen: It was about two years.

02-00:15:37
Dunham: How did your time there come to an end?

02-00:15:41
Cohen: I believe at the time, things were slowing down. It was quieting down, but it was still—

02-00:15:47
Dunham: Forty-three, but it was slowing down some.

02-00:15:51
Cohen: I think my sister and I decided that we've done our share, what we thought our share, and it's time that we move on to something else. That's when we decided that—it was hard. It was hard giving it up, because it was still necessary. But I felt that maybe there's something else out there for me. She was getting kind of discouraged. She was going out with this man and wanted to get married. We decided to end that. It took its toll. It did take its toll, particularly on the travel part. Not so much on the work. We had a lot of energy, we were young. But the travel really—there were a lot of complications that we had to deal with. The driver was very judgmental. He wasn't a very nice person. He was the only driver that we could get that was going out there to work.

02-00:16:46
Dunham: How did that come out, his judgmental nature? Would he say things?

02-00:16:52
Cohen: The driver, you mean?

02-00:16:53
Dunham: Yeah.

02-00:16:54
Cohen: He was kind of nasty. He kept making fun of us, making some remarks about how we look in pants. We look like dowdy old ladies. He wasn't a very nice person at all. He had gone through a bad divorce. He was an older man. He was early forties, which was old to us. We paid him pretty good money. We had to pay him. We had no choice. He was the only driver that they had that was able to go out there from the area that we ended our train trip. We really didn't have much choice, so we had to deal with him. He had a very bad marriage, and he was divorced one time. He just laid it on thick. It just wasn't a pleasant situation. The drive was quite far. From the time we got off the train, we still had at least close to forty-five minutes to get to the plant.

02-00:17:57

Dunham:

Did you ever say anything kind of back to him to address his negative things he was saying?

02-00:18:03

Cohen:

We said, “Look, we’re all in this together, so let’s try to make the ride pleasant.” It was very hard. He was just one of these guys that you could never—he only focused on bad things. If he had a cold or his wife was sick or his child—every day was another story. It was just such a drag. It was just something we stuck with because there was no alternative. Really, there was no alternative. Neither one of us drove at the time. We just had no choice. It began to wear on us a lot. It took its toll. I figured there must be something else out there that we can do. She was more intent on getting married and having a family.

02-00:18:55

Dunham:

Back on the commute, I know you had to pay the driver, but was rationing an issue with the gasoline or anything? Do you know how that worked?

02-00:19:03

Cohen:

No. The company didn’t provide anything. No.

02-00:19:07

Dunham:

So he had enough gas to handle it? Okay.

02-00:19:10

Cohen:

All on our own.

02-00:19:11

Dunham:

Do you remember experiences with rationing or victory gardens?

02-00:019:15

Cohen:

I remember stockings. Hosiery, I remember that, and gasoline. But apparently he had enough of some kind of contacts to have enough gasoline to get to work, to get there. The car broke down a couple of times, and we had a problem with that. I remember several times it broke down. We had a flat tire once, so we got to work later. When you’re dealing with that kind of climate, that ice and snow—it was not a new car. It was a relatively older car. In those days, cars were not made as well as they are today. He’d always complain. I remember we’d have to have the oil change. He’s going to wait. He’s going to not do it right away. So he let the car go, and a lot of times he didn’t take care of his car at all. The condition inside—he had a couple kids. There was everything from popcorn to diapers to everything on the car floor. We just accepted it because it was just one of those things that we felt that we had to do for our country. Even today, when I’m alone and they play “The Star-Spangled Banner,” I get up. I stand up through the whole thing. Somebody once saw me do that. In somebody’s home. “Are you crazy?” I said “No, I have to stand up. I’m sorry.” The patriotism is very strong.

02-00:20:55

Dunham: Did that start as a child or did that start during the war? When did that—do you know?

02-00:21:00

Cohen: My patriotism?

02-00:21:00

Dunham: Yeah, your sense of patriotism.

02-00:21:01

Cohen: I think it started during the war. Oh, yeah. That's why I joined the Army. I would do anything. I'm not saying "my country right or wrong." There's a lot wrong. But I've traveled a lot. I've been to fifty-one countries. There's no place better to live or have an opportunity as America. Even though there are countries now—like Brazil, of course, is doing extremely well. But I still feel that if a person wants an opportunity, like I came from Croatia and Myanmar. But if a person could get into America—and that's why they want to come in. There's opportunities if you want them. That's why so many people try to sneak in. There are two things I tell people on the internet, that I'll delete immediately: if it's political or immigration. Those two subjects, I'm out of it. I don't even want to talk about it. I don't want to hear about it. The minute I see a sign, Rick Perry or Obama, I just take it off. I don't even read it. And immigration, I don't—

02-00:22:21

Dunham: Where do you communicate on the internet? Like Facebook or—

02-00:22:27

Cohen: I don't have a computer. We have computers downstairs.

02-00:22:31

Dunham: Oh, okay. And you do email?

02-00:22:32

Cohen: I don't pay for that. I mean, I pay my rent. They have three computers down there. Not too many people use them. Most people have their own. I thought of getting my own, but I really don't have any place to put it. I just do some email and that's about it. I do some things on Word and stuff like that, but I'm not on Facebook. It's kind of fun. When I first learned how to do it, I learned here, actually. We had a teacher there. We still have different teachers. When he first taught me—he was very strict, though. He was a very strict teacher. We don't pay for that. That's part of the—we don't get food here. It's independent living. He was very strict. He said, "I'm going to show you once, and you do it. That's it." That was good. So I learned fast. It's fun. I enjoy it. But after a while, I come back from vacation—like I came back. I was gone three weeks. I had 2,071 emails.

02-00:23:44

Dunham:

I had one other question about Grumman. I know your shift rotated, whether you were working graveyard, swing, or day shift. Did you have a strong preference for which shift you were on?

02-00:23:58

Cohen:

Yeah. I preferred the day shift. I really did. It was more normal. At least you'd get sleep at night.

02-00:24:06

Dunham:

Did you have any say or did it just rotate?

02-00:24:08

Cohen:

No, it rotated. You didn't have any—no. You're told that the first day. The first day.

02-00:24:15

Dunham:

Did you and your sister, with the trouble with the driver and just that long commute, was it ever a consideration to try to find a place to live near the plant or not?

02-00:24:25

Cohen:

No, it was never a consideration because we had to pay to help my parents. We wouldn't have had the money to have a place. I thought, one time, that we should try to get a furnished room or something in that area, in Linden. There were some places that advertised. They had a big bulletin board. There were some places, room for rent, or share an apartment, but we never considered it because my parents really needed our help, even though we didn't have much time off. My mother wasn't too well at the time. We helped home.

02-00:25:05

Dunham:

You had the growing sense of patriotism. After you left Grumman, this led to your joining the Army. How much time passed between this, and how did it come about?

02-00:25:13

Cohen:

I came to California to help my father. He came out here to try to make a living and bring my mother here, and family. She heard about California. She'd never been here, but I know she always wanted to live here. He said, okay, he's going to go out and try to find something. Unfortunately, he got sick while he was here, and he had to go home. He took the train home.

02-00:25:35

Dunham:

Where did he come? What kind of work was he looking for?

02-00:25:38

Cohen:

Baking. Bagel baking.

02-00:25:40

Dunham:

In Southern Cal?

02-00:25:41

Cohen:

Yeah. At that time, there weren't even any here. Now they have this big factory right up here. Every place you go, there's bagels.

02-00:25:50

Dunham:

Was he hoping to start a business?

02-00:25:52

Cohen:

No, probably to work for somebody at first, maybe. I don't think start a business. He wasn't that well by that time. My mother said I could stay here, so I got an apartment. This is funny. I got an apartment in Beverly Hills. It was furnished. Very pretty. I remember it was all blue and white, and it was \$25 a month, including linens. Every week, linens. Then I got a job working at Sardi's on Hollywood and Vine, and I was a breakfast hostess for Tom Brenneman. People used to come from all over the world, wearing beautiful hats, and he would interview them. I would be his hostess right on Hollywood and Vine. It was called Sardi's. I worked until ten o'clock at night, and then at eleven o'clock at night, I went to a place, and I worked in another place, eleven to two in the morning, at a counter. People came in late for snacks and stuff. I sent money home. I got the two jobs.

It was hard, because one of them was like a split shift, the one at Sardi's. I was a food checker. At night, when the girls came in to waitress, they would want to bring out steaks, and everything was rationed then, so I had to check to make sure they're not taking steaks to their boyfriend and not charging them. I had to do that. Then I found out that the place I was working from eleven to two was holding guns. They were holding guns. I don't know where the guns were, but there were loaded trucks with guns.

02-00:27:40

Dunham:

This is a bar or a club?

02-00:27:42

Cohen:

No, it was like a coffee shop. It was just a counter. This was like a front. This was like a front.

02-00:27:51

Dunham:

Did you know the owners, or did you know what was—

02-00:27:53

Cohen:

No, I don't know what they were doing.

02-00:27:55

Dunham:

How did you find out about the guns?

02-00:27:56

Cohen:

I saw the guns. I saw them unloading guns in the back of the place. It was unloading guns, and I didn't know what they were doing.

02-00:28:04
Dunham: So did you get out of there shortly after?

02-00:28:05
Cohen: I asked them what they were doing. He said, "Mind your own business."

02-00:28:09
Dunham: Did you continue working there?

02-00:28:10
Cohen: At one time, I had one of the most devastating experiences of my life. One time, I didn't have any transportation to get home. I don't know what happened. I didn't have a car or anything. A car came by and said, "Can I help you?" I said, "I have to go home." He said, "I'll take you." I was very naïve. He was heading up the Hill, up the Hollywood Hill, and I said, "I live the other way." He said, "Yeah, but they're doing road repair. I'll get you home." Some gut feeling got me so frightened, you know? When the light changed—in those days, they didn't have door locks, so I was able to open the door. He pulled away, and I fell and I got hurt, but I got out. A few weeks later, I saw a photograph. He had run a white slavery ring up in the mountains.

02-00:29:06
Dunham: Oh my gosh. Women? Like prostitution?

02-00:29:13
Cohen: Yeah. That's where I would have—

02-00:29:16
Dunham: He got caught not long after?

02-00:29:19
Cohen: Several weeks later.

02-00:29:20
Dunham: Wow. Wow, how scary.

02-00:29:22
Cohen: That, I'll never forget. I thank God that I had the sense to jump out of the car. These were things—

02-00:29:33
Dunham: After you found out about the guns, did you continue working there for a time?

02-00:29:36
Cohen: Yeah, I did. I don't know what the purpose was. I didn't know whether he was blacklisting something or doing something, blackmail. I don't know. He told me to mind my own business. There was no customers at that time. I should have realized that there's something not kosher about it.

02-00:29:57
Dunham: While you were working there from eleven to two?

02-00:29:58
Cohen: Yeah.

02-00:30:00
Dunham: So what were you there—

02-00:30:00
Cohen: Eleven p.m. to 2:00 a.m.

02-00:30:02
Dunham: You just sat there?

02-00:30:03
Cohen: Well, somebody would come in and get a cup of coffee or a sandwich or something. I'd make it for them. An egg sandwich or whatever.

02-00:30:10
Dunham: But it was very few?

02-00:30:12
Cohen: Then the next morning, I had to be over at Sardi's. The next morning.

02-00:30:17
Dunham: How long a shift did you do at Sardi's?

02-00:30:21
Cohen: Until I joined the Army.

02-00:30:23
Dunham: What time of day until what time were you—

02-00:30:25
Cohen: I worked from ten to two, ten in the morning until two, with breakfast at Sardi's. Then I had a break for about two hours. Then I came back and I started to do the food tracking in the kitchen.

02-00:30:39
Dunham: Long day and long night. How many days a week?

02-00:30:42
Cohen: Six days.

02-00:30:44
Dunham: Is this in '43 or '44? When did you come out to California?

02-00:30:48
Cohen: Forty-three. Well, '43, I joined. No, '42. Between '42 and '42, somewhere in that period of time.

02-00:30:58

Dunham: How long were you out in California before you joined the Army? What was California like? This was your first time out here.

02-00:31:05

Cohen: I thought it was so pretty. I loved the palm trees. It was so pretty.

02-00:31:09

Dunham: Did you have an idea of it before you came?

02-00:31:12

Cohen: I heard that California was beautiful. I never had any desire to move here. I just came to try to help my father. Unfortunately, he got sick. I just stayed for a while. Then one day, two women that—not naïve like I was. They had seen the whole bit of everything. They had gorgeous rings on. I remember that. Their boyfriends gave them—whatever. They both were beautiful. I had pictures of them, but apparently when I moved I got rid of them. They were such beautiful women. Gorgeous women. I don't know. Just one day, we were friendly, and they said, "Let's join the service. The three of us." That's when we all went, three of us went to the Marines, and they wouldn't take me. They said they're not going to go unless we can all go together. We went to the Navy, like I told you. I never thought about the Coast Guard. Then we finally all ended up in the Army. We all went home, and then we got our notice to report to Des Moines, Iowa. We met there. We were all together in Des Moines, Iowa. Then we were sent to different bases.

02-00:32:38

Dunham: So in between when you applied and you got your notice, you went home to New York and told your parents. What was that like?

02-00:32:45

Cohen: It wasn't very good.

02-00:32:48

Dunham: Did you know that they would be upset?

02-00:32:49

Cohen: Well, yeah. I knew that they would not want that. We lived on the ground floor, and I remember my mother and father going to a store or something. My mother looked up at me, and she gave me a look that, if looks could kill, I would have been dead. That look really hurt me. That's why I was kind of glad when I was coming back to see her, when I went on furlough. And of course she died.

02-00:33:16

Dunham: Were they worried?

02-00:33:19

Cohen: Yeah, I think so. I think they were kind of worried that you go to war and something will happen. It was sad, because she would have been very proud. I

think she was really looking forward to me going with her in uniform and walking down the street. I think at that point, she was proud.

02-00:33:36

Dunham: She came over to it. Warmed up to it.

02-00:33:37

Cohen: Yeah. It was too late. Oh, yeah. Then my brother took me to the bus or something. I took the train to Des Moines, Iowa.

02-00:33:49

Dunham: What was that like? Basic training.

02-00:33:0528

Cohen: Des Moines, Iowa in January is very cold. Very, very cold. It was different. I never had a lot of clothes. I wasn't one of these clotheshorse women, even today. I have one small closet. That's enough for me. All we had was a footlocker in front of our bed, and we had a little, tiny area to hang some clothes, and that's it. Didn't have any more. That's it. But it works. It does work. When I was sent to Tucson after that I was—

02-00:34:32

Dunham: When you were in Des Moines, was it your two friends who you joined with and a group of other women?

02-00:34:38

Cohen: We all went different directions. They sent us different—

02-00:34:41

Dunham: Were you in—

02-00:34:42

Cohen: None of them went to Tucson.

02-00:34:45

Dunham: Was it all women, though, in the training?

02-00:34:47

Cohen: Yeah, it was just women.

02-00:34:49

Dunham: How long was your training?

02-00:34:50

Cohen: Six weeks.

02-00:34:51

Dunham: What was that like? Was it hard?

02-00:34:53

Cohen: It wasn't hard. It's just that it was very sand. The sand came in, blew in. It was very windy and sandy. The colonel, a male colonel, came into the base to see

if there's any dust. They wear white gloves. Naturally, when they put their hand on anything, two seconds later, it's dusty again. One time, because my windowsill, the area was so dusty—and then he put a coin on my bed. See, the bed has to be very tight. You've got to make it a certain way. If the coin doesn't jump up—it has to jump up. Then I had to clean the latrines for twenty-two days. That was my penalty.

02-00:35:45

Dunham: Because the coin didn't jump up?

02-00:35:46

Cohen: Because the coin didn't jump up, and the window was dusty.

02-00:35:51

Dunham: So that was not fun.

02-00:35:53

Cohen: No, it was terrible.

02-00:35:54

Dunham: Did you have to do that by yourself?

02-00:35:56

Cohen: Yeah—well, there was another couple that got penalized, too. It was just terrible.

02-00:36:02

Dunham: Sorry, your neck thing—just pull it this way a little bit. It's just hitting the microphone. Oh, yeah, maybe for now that might be—sorry.

02-00:36:14

Cohen: At one time, in Tucson, too, we had one woman next to me. I had the upper bunk all the time. She would bathe every day, or every other day or whatever, but she'd never wash her laundry. She'd never wash it. She would put on the same stuff every day. The same underwear. Then a bunch of us got together and decided to throw it into the water, and then we got in trouble for that.

02-00:36:42

Dunham: Did she have any other clothes?

02-00:36:44

Cohen: She had, but she just didn't want to change. It smelled. She smelled. Then we all got together, a bunch of us, and we all got in trouble.

02-00:36:54

Dunham: What was your punishment for that?

02-00:36:58

Cohen: They penalized us. We had to do something outside.

02-00:37:01

Dunham: Had any of you tried to talk to her about it?

- 02-00:37:04
Cohen: Yeah, we did, but she just shrugged her shoulders.
- 02-00:37:08
Dunham: When you were assigned to Tucson, how was the assignment? Did you have any choice, or were you just—
- 02-00:37:12
Cohen: No. We just got our orders to go to Tucson.
- 02-00:37:16
Dunham: I thought, maybe, since you worked on airplanes there, your interest in airplanes was a factor.
- 02-00:37:20
Cohen: I asked to work on aircraft. When I joined, I told them I'd like to go to an airbase, and that's where they sent me, to an airbase.
- 02-00:37:29
Dunham: Do you know where your friends went?
- 02-00:37:31
Cohen: I stayed in touch with them. They went to different areas. One was in Wyoming someplace, and one was in North Carolina.
- 02-00:37:39
Dunham: What kind of work were they doing?
- 02-00:37:42
Cohen: Actually, one of them was saying she was doing office work, and the other one was doing some kind of mechanical work. She was being taught to do some mechanical work. Simple mechanics, she said. I was in touch with them. But I was sent to Tucson, and that's when I worked on—
- 02-00:37:58
Dunham: What was that like?
- 02-00:38:00
Cohen: I worked on the B-29s. The B-29s, when they came back from the war area, they had to be repaired. I would be one of the people who would help repair the plane. There, again, we did riveting, too. We had to repair it. B-29s are a big aircraft. They let me go up a few times when they tested the plane. They let me come up. That was very, very exciting. Then I was working next to a woman who was Hispanic, who was not in the military. She was a private—
- 02-00:38:42
Dunham: Civilian.
- 02-00:38:42
Cohen: Right. She invited me to her home. There were 14,000 men and 150 women. Really quite a ratio. We were restricted to the base a lot of times for different

reasons. But when I wasn't and I had some time off, I would go to her home in Tucson. I became part of the family. They loved me very much, and I loved them. When I lost my mother, they were so supportive. They took care of me. They really were so kind. They had four children. Two were retarded, and two were okay. My friend was okay. I remember the mother and father saying to me, they hope that the two children die before they did, because she did not want them to be put into a home. She made my girlfriend, Delores, my friend Delores and their daughter, they made her promise that she would never put her sister and brother in a home. That was on her deathbed. They're Catholic, and they don't deviate from anything. She made that promise to her mother.

They both died, the mother and father died. Here Delores came to take care of them at the house that they lived in. That was okay, except when the daughter died—the girl died first—cancer—the brother became very violent. I think, later on, many years later, she had to put him somewhere, because it was just impossible. He was too violent. It was very sad that happened. She was married, Delores was married. But he was a womanizer. He had girlfriends all over the place. She was so crushed by that, but she wouldn't leave him. They were a nice family, but they were so good to me and I was so grateful to have them there when I needed them.

02-00:40:55

Dunham:

Yeah, you were fortunate. It sounds like you stayed friends.

02-00:40:59

Cohen:

Oh, yeah. They're all gone now. She had one son that was in prison. He didn't really kill anyone, but he's Hispanic, and they gave him a very hard sentence. He was drunk one day, and he shot a gun into the ceiling but didn't hurt anyone. He got fourteen years.

02-00:41:18

Dunham:

Oh my goodness.

02-00:41:20

Cohen:

I don't know. I used to go back every year to visit him in prison. It was very sad. They had no money to get an attorney, to pay a good attorney.

02-00:41:36

Dunham:

Back on the base, did you say 14,000 men and 150 women?

02-00:41:39

Cohen:

That's what they said. There were 14,000 men.

02-00:41:41

Dunham:

What was that like?

02-00:41:45

Cohen:

I remember telling the manager—I worked for the state of California; I got a job when I got out—I remember telling him, "If I had jumped in the bushes every five minutes, you'd be working for me." They had money. Not a lot.

They weren't making big money, but they had the money. They couldn't get off the base. They wouldn't mind having a woman to have some sex with. But I was so naïve, honestly. I was afraid to have somebody touch me. I thought I'd get pregnant if they just touched me.

02-00:42:27

Dunham:

Was there a lot of catcalling or harassing? You're an attractive young woman.

02-00:42:31

Cohen:

There was one girl, one of my best friends, her name was Annabel Lee, from Birmingham, Alabama, and she got pregnant. It was so sad because she was such a sweet woman. I don't know that she had any knowledge of anything herself, but she got pregnant. She told who it was, but that guy was already shipped out. Who knows how many other guys she played around—I don't know. She had to be discharged. They got rid of her.

As soon as I got out of the service, I took a train and I went to see Annabel in Birmingham. Now, remember, I did not grow up in the South, so I was not aware of black and white, other than the fact that we got along. Of course, they had black toilets and white toilets, and they had the black fountain and the white fountain. Then I went to buy a present for the baby. I knew the baby must be about a year old. Not even a year old, no. I went to buy a present, and the woman behind the counter said, "May I help you, madam?" There were three black women waiting to be waited on. I said, "These ladies were here first." She kept yelling, "May I help *you*, madam?" I guess when a white woman approaches the counter, they have to be served first. I don't know. Whatever. Then I had a hard time finding her place. When I finally got there, it was absolutely a nightmare. There was a room this size. This size. Not the kitchen, just this size. Eleven people sleeping in the room. Eleven. She'd lost her leg. They cut her leg off all the way to the top.

02-00:44:18

Dunham:

During the pregnancy?

02-00:44:20

Cohen:

Yeah. After, I guess. She said they had milk leg. She said they called it milk leg, and they had to remove her leg. She's got the little baby. She's got one leg. The toilets are outside; I had to go the bathroom. I just wanted to get away. I felt so bad. What happened to her life was just so devastating. Whatever happened to her, I don't know. After that, I don't know. It was a very sad commentary of a young girl who left the South and got into this kind of situation. I didn't even know where these people slept. We never had luxury at our home either. We had a large family, but at least we had a bed to sleep on. Anyway, it was very sad.

02-00:45:09

Dunham:

Did you stay overnight there or did you—

02-00:45:11
Cohen: Oh, no.

02-00:45:12
Dunham: Where did you stay or how did you—

02-00:45:13
Cohen: I just left. I just left and found my way back.

02-00:45:17
Dunham: Had you gone out on the train?

02-00:45:18
Cohen: Yeah, I went back on the train. I don't know if I stayed overnight somewhere. I think I got a train that night, late that night.

02-00:45:26
Dunham: This is while you were still in the Army that you went to visit her, or it was after?

02-00:45:28
Cohen: No, I was out. I just got out. I had just gotten out. I was determined to see her. I knew the address and I knew it was Birmingham, Alabama, but I'd never been there before. [phone rings]

02-00:45:42
Dunham: Want to pause for a sec? Back at the base, where you're working on repairing these planes, did you get any special training to do repairs?

02-00:45:53
Cohen: Oh, yeah. That's what I loved about that job. I really loved it, because I was working on aircraft. That was wonderful. I didn't always have the same part to work on. They had a supervisor—not a supervisor, a military supervisor—and he would show me what had to be done. We had to put some kind of—I forget what you call it—some kind of cloth over the wings, things of that sort. They were big, beautiful aircraft. I was back there not too long ago.

02-00:46:35
Dunham: The Arizona graveyard, right?

02-00:46:36
Cohen: Yeah.

02-00:46:38
Dunham: Did you see some B-29s, the type you had worked on, with lots of other planes there, too, right?

02-00:46:43
Cohen: Mostly B-29s. Mostly B-29s.

02-00:46:46
Dunham: I saw when you had mentioned that—

02-00:46:48
Cohen:

That was Davis-Monthan Field. B-29s. B-52s were a bigger aircraft. They had a couple there. The B-17, I liked that one, too, but the B-29 was the one we worked on. That was nice. There's something about flying. I have several million miles, probably, under my belt. That's why I said when I retire, whatever job, from the state of California, I'm going to take the Concorde. It's a good thing I did, because now they no longer—and it was very sad, because it's an amazing aircraft. The way it takes off and the way you see the speed of sound. They have the monitor of the speed of the plane, how fast it's going when you break the sound barrier. Then, at that time—it was before 9/11, so I had told the engineer of the plane that I'd like to see the cockpit. I'd like to go. They did. I told him I was in the military, so he let me come in, and it was amazing to see the engineering of that equipment. They had walls of dials. A thousand. It looked like thousands of dials of different things. You've got to know what you're doing. Then the pilot was talking to me. It was really nice. I was so excited. After 9/11, it would never have happened. There were a lot of movie stars on there. I think Diana Ross was on there. I can't remember. But there were. My husband wasn't going to go on it. He said it's a little expensive. We took the QE2 back from London. We took the New York to London. It was three hours and about sixteen minutes. It was a nice ride. They feed you all the way across. The guy said to me, "Have some champagne." I said, "Well, I don't know if I like it." He said, "Look, it's \$65 a bottle. Why don't you try a glass of that?" It was a nice experience. Sometimes you just have to do something that you want to do, and the time passes and you don't do it.

02-00:49:28
Dunham:

I'm thinking back about your transition from New York to California, and then into the Army, mostly there in Tucson. In California, I know you were busy doing all this work, but were you also socializing or dating at all in California? What was your time—

02-00:49:45
Cohen:

Not really, no. I didn't have time. I didn't have time. I was going from one job to another. I just had time to eat and sleep and go back to work. That's all I was doing.

02-00:49:57
Dunham:

But you're an attractive young woman working at Sardi's and all. Did you get propositions?

02-00:50:05
Cohen:

It's very interesting. Like I said, I was very naïve. Remember that. We had a beautiful bar at Sardi's. Very nice, big bar. A gentleman came in, gray-haired gentleman. Very handsome. Then I saw all these people coming in, other men. Younger men. They looked like they're twenties. Quite a few of them came in. They all were together. Unbeknown to me—like I said, I didn't know anything—and then they left. This was all gay men. He was taking them back

to his mansion. He had a very big mansion in Holmby Hills or someplace, and he was taking all these young guys back with him.

02-00:50:55

Dunham: How did you find out that that was the case?

02-00:50:57

Cohen: The chef. He knew them very well. He knew the man well. They were friends. He said he's not gay himself, but at the time, he knew that he was. Of course, at that time, being gay was—

02-00:51:19

Dunham: Pretty closeted. Had you known of any other gays or lesbians growing up?

02-00:51:24

Cohen: You know what? Yes. When I went to work for the state of California—I don't test very well. I'm not a good test-taker. In an interview, I can do well.

02-00:51:24

Dunham: I can see that.

02-00:51:43

Cohen: Not for writing. I get nervous. I just barely passed the test for the State of California. But by being a veteran, my score went up from about 72 to 111, so I was hired right away. Later on I got promoted, and I became a veteran representative. What that meant is that I'd go into the field and I'd develop jobs for any and all U.S. veterans of any war. That was my job. But I don't like to do paperwork. I'm not interested in doing the paperwork, which has to be done. You're under the umbrella of the federal government when you have that job, even though you work for the State. One day, a man came in, and he was a Vietnam veteran, and he wanted a job. I talked to him, and he was gay. I could tell that he was very good at paperwork. Very fussy. Everything has got to be perfect. I thought, oh my God, this is for me. But my manager wouldn't hire him, because she was against gays. Finally, she succumbed and she hired him. She didn't want to. She's very anti-gay.

But he had a problem. He drank a lot. He was an alcoholic. He met a guy. He was running out of money. He was making good money; the state of California pays pretty okay. He ran out of money, and then he went to a bar, a gay bar, and met a man twenty years older than him, and he moved in with him, because this older fellow supported him. Then he went to Alcoholics Anonymous, and he straightened himself out. At that point, he wanted to leave the older man. He said, I don't want to live with an old man. Then he wanted to kill himself, because he loved this young fellow. He loved him very much. He would call me in the middle of the night, because I got to know him. He said, "Mary, he wants to move out. I don't want that. I want him. I love him." This went on for a while. Finally, Ed did move out, and then the older fellow—they're both named Ed, Edward, whatever—he moved to Oregon to

be with his mother, and he eventually passed away. Not from anything to do with AIDS.

Fast forward now many years. My husband dies, and I call Ed up. I knew where he was. I knew where he was transferred to, Palm Springs. I called him up. I said, “Stan died. I just want to let you know.” “Oh,” he said, “I want to come to see you.” Now it’s twenty years later. I said, “Okay. I’m home. Come any time you want to.” My husband died in Israel and was buried there, and I flew home. The next day, it was pouring rain. Ed comes to my house with a man who’s twenty years younger than him. Very sexy. Sequin top. Very sexy. What goes around comes around. He said, “Mary, what are you going to do with Stan’s car?” Stan was my husband. We had two cars. I don’t need two cars. I said, “I’m going to sell it.” Now he wants to buy it for his friend. He said, “How much do you want for it?” I said, “\$2,000.” It was a very good car. He said, “Oh, that’s too much, Mary. If you can make it a little cheaper, let me know. I’d like to buy it for my friend.” I thought this was so interesting, the fact that what he did to this other fellow, this is exactly what’s happening with this young fellow now.

02-00:56:11

Dunham: Have you stayed in touch with him?

02-00:56:12

Cohen: Not anymore. The last contact was he was in Palm Springs.

02-00:56:16

Dunham: It sounds like you were good friends, and your families knew each other.

02-00:56:22

Cohen: He was a wonderful worker. I went out in the field. I developed jobs for different veterans. Some of them were real challenging. One fellow, one young man, was very nice. He was getting out of the service, and he wanted something to do with health foods. Not just vitamins. Like a little restaurant that had health foods. That’s what he wanted. After three months, I finally found a place right here in the Valley. A little restaurant, and they sell all health foods. He said, “Oh, that’s wonderful.” But the owner said, “He’s got to come at 11:30 and have lunch with me, and I’d like to interview him.” The next day, I find out he did not get the job, and I was so frustrated. I couldn’t believe it. I said, why? He’s such a nice, clean-cut—no earrings, no tattoos, nothing like that. He didn’t want any of that. I found out why. Because, when they sat down and had lunch, he didn’t taste the food, but he salted it first, and you can’t do that. It took a long time, but I finally found another job for him. I felt so bad. The other employers said, “Taste the food first.” Salt is bad for you. Salt it afterwards, after you taste it, but not before.

02-00:57:52

Dunham: You passed that on, that that had been—

02-00:57:54
Cohen: Of course. I had a few close calls. You spend so much time looking for the right job for the right person.

02-00:58:05
Dunham: When you got out of the Army, did you qualify for a GI Bill?

02-00:58:09
Cohen: Oh, yeah.

02-00:58:10
Dunham: You were eligible for that.

02-00:58:12
Cohen: I took advantage of the one for the house, to buy the house. I paid 2 percent mortgage.

02-00:58:18
Dunham: Okay. That was good.

02-00:58:21
Cohen: Two percent, which was pretty good. I could have taken educational rights and other things, but I really had to get a job. It was that kind of situation.

02-00:58:31
Dunham: The German American friend that you made, that was in the Army in Tucson, is that right?

02-00:58:39
Cohen: No, that was in Mitchel Field, where I did the recruiting. To encourage young men and women to join the Army. We visited high schools and colleges in a large caravan.

02-00:58:44
Dunham: Oh, after you went to work? So this is when you're out of the Army, working—

02-00:58:48
Cohen: No, I'm still in the Army.

02-00:58:50
Dunham: But before state of California? Because you did similar work for state of California, right?

02-00:59:02
Cohen: Actually, the reason I went to work for the state of California is because I wanted the benefits, too, like retirement. But before I took that job—I had about twenty jobs in my lifetime or more—I did referendums. I would go out in the field, because I had to get a job. My husband had a job when he could get work, but he was laid off a lot because he was working on aircraft, and part-time and stuff. So I had to get a job. I had no money. I went out and

thought, “Okay, I’ll get a job. The kids are little, and he’ll be home at night, and I’ll go out in the field.” So I did referendums. They had the lottery petition. The first one failed. I worked on that. I got twenty cents a name, ten cents when I finished and then ten cents when they found out they’re registered voters. So I took that job.

02-00:59:54

Dunham:

What year is this, about? Or what decade even?

02-01:00:00

Cohen:

In the fifties, the early fifties. It turned out I was working for a woman who was very anti-Semitic. She told me right off the bat, she hates Jews.

02-01:00:12

Dunham:

Did she know you were Jewish?

02-01:00:14

Cohen:

Yeah. She knew my name, Mary Cohen. She said, “I make money on what you make, so I’ll hire you.” I was very bitter about it, but I didn’t say anything. I took it. Then I got a call from Mr. Keaton, who runs the advertising agency that she worked for, and he hired her. Then he said, “Come down to Spring Street. I have an offer for you.” I said, “What’s the offer?” He said, “Come down.” So I went down to Spring Street, and I met Mr. Keaton. He said, “You know what? I would like to get rid of her.” I never told him about her. He said, “I want to get rid of her. I don’t like her attitude. I don’t like that she doesn’t cover the Valley. I would like you to handle the San Fernando Valley.” I said, “The whole San Fernando?” He said, “Everything. I will pay you five cents a name. Whatever your people get.” I said, “Yeah, but I’m getting twenty cents.” He said, “Look, you could go out, too. You want to go out and work, fine.” Within about ten days, I had 200 people working for me. During the election year, when they want the referendum—now, I don’t know, they probably make a dollar a name. One time, I was called for Forest Lawn Cemetery. I did a job for them. I got \$15 a name. I’ll tell you, this is amazing. But it didn’t give you any kind of benefits. You didn’t get anything. That’s why I decided I really need a job where I’ll have medical care and other benefits. Not only social security, but retirement.

02-01:02:07

Dunham:

I need to pause again for a second.

Begin Audio File 3 cohen_mary_03_12-28-11.mp3

03-00:00:00

Cohen:

Now I volunteer at a hospital in pediatric where I read to children. I get lunch. I usually bring my lunch home and I have it for dinner. They had a wrap today. It was very nice. The guy made a real nice, big wrap.

03-00:00:08

Dunham:

That's a nice little benefit from volunteering there. We are at tape three, today, December 28, 2011, with Mary Kaminsky Cohen. We're just wrapping up. Just had a couple of other questions. When you were repairing the planes in Tucson for the Army, about how long did you do that? I know you said, overall, there were about—I think it was 14,000 men and 150 women. Were most of the other women doing similar work to you?

03-00:00:37

Cohen:

No. There were very few, actually, other women. The women had different types of jobs. I noticed one of my friends, she had something to do with the paperwork. A lot of them did paperwork. Most of them did paperwork. There were only about four of us that I remember that were actually working on the aircraft. The rest were doing mostly clerical type of work. They were okay with that, I guess, but to me that would be boring. Working on the planes was my goal, and that's what I wanted. I was so grateful that they put me on an airbase in Tucson, because that was the longest period of time that I was in the Army. I don't know. Watching those planes take off and land was, for me, so exciting. I was just so excited.

03-00:01:25

Dunham:

When you got up and had the chance to fly in them, did that rekindle your desire to fly yourself?

03-00:01:31

Cohen:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

03-00:01:33

Dunham:

Was there ever any opportunity or path that—

03-00:01:36

Cohen:

No.

03-00:01:37

Dunham:

So that was just sort of a frustrating desire, I guess? Next lifetime, like you said.

03-00:01:45

Cohen:

The pilots of those planes—those were big planes. Although I do know that the WASPs girl—there was some that flew the B-29. I found that out. I found that out only a week ago, that they did fly. Not all of them. Some of them flew a B-29.

03-00:02:01

Dunham:

Would you tell people about your experiences flying as a sixteen-year-old, and that you had done that?

03-00:02:08

Cohen:

Yeah. I could have kept my license, just for the heck of it, but I didn't. It would have been kind of fun. You had to renew it every so many years. It was

a small aircraft. It's hard to explain to anybody that has never flown a plane by themselves how it feels to get up in the clouds. Don't forget, at that time, you have to remember, we didn't have the equipment. I had to take off and land. I had to follow railroad tracks, and I had to follow a church. I had to take a look to see where I had to land because there was no equipment other than landing marks.

03-00:03:01

Dunham: This is on Long Island that you're doing this?

03-00:03:03

Cohen: Yeah. You had things to look at. You have to see, oh, that house over there is yellow. I'll have to head over to that and then land. You had to have landing marks. You didn't have any other way to land your plane, to get down.

03-00:03:26

Dunham: Did you stay in touch in the years with the man who had taught you to fly?

03-00:03:32

Cohen: Yeah, for a few years. I don't know whatever happened. I think they moved out of the country. They came from London, somewhere near London, and they were thinking of going back to the country because they had family there, and they had two children. My parents never found out about it.

03-00:03:56

Dunham: Oh, they didn't—

03-00:03:57

Cohen: No, they never found out. I never told them. I think they were afraid of getting killed. Because you can get killed. Look at that white slavery thing. I could have been worse than killed.

03-00:04:15

Dunham: Did any of your siblings know about it? Your sister?

03-00:04:19

Cohen: I think I must have told them, yeah. I think I must have told them. I took a lot of chances. I was one of these people that, when I went on a trip, even—one time, I went on a Russian tanker, because I missed the ship. My husband was on the ship, and we were landing in Venice, I think it was. I just took off by myself. I'm sort of a free person. I don't like to be connected with anyone. I don't like to hang on to anybody. A friend of mine wants to go to Israel and she wants to go to other places, but she hangs on to me. I can't do that. I'm a free-spirit kind of person.

03-00:05:02

Dunham: What happened with the Russian tanker?

03-00:05:07

Cohen:

The ship was gone. Nowadays, everything is done electronically, and they know if you're gone. But that time, they didn't know, so I was put on a Russian tanker. I was screaming, and the ship was gone. I didn't know what to do, so I was screaming, and they put me on a Russian tanker to the next port.

03-00:05:26

Dunham:

Where you could catch up.

03-00:05:27

Cohen:

Yes. Everyone was happy to see me, but my husband wasn't. He was mad. He was so mad at me. He was so angry. He later came and told me he was so fearful for my safety.

03-00:05:36

Dunham:

How did you miss the ship?

03-00:05:39

Cohen:

The ship was not docked. The water wasn't deep enough to dock the ship there. The ship was docked out, and they tendered you in small boats. They tendered me in, and then I decided to take a ride on another boat, a bigger boat—not a bigger boat than—ours was a cruise ship—that was just going out. I thought it will probably come back to the same place. I'll be okay. I wasn't worried. But then I realized that they're taking too long. Then when I got back, the ship was gone. I took chances like that. I still take chances, and one of these days I may not make it back.

03-00:06:28

Dunham:

You've made it this far. You're an adventurer, and I think your confidence and spirit prevail.

03-00:06:32

Cohen:

It's kind of fun. It's exciting when it happens because it's so unusual, but still. One time, I almost missed the bus from Paris. We were heading to Germany. I don't even know where we were going in Germany. I said to my husband, "I want to get out. I'm all church'd out. I've seen so many churches. I want to get out and walk around. I'll meet you on the bus." Well, there were a thousand buses. I couldn't find my bus. I didn't even know where we were heading. I knew we were heading for Germany, but I didn't know where. I don't know if I would have ever found my way back. I don't know. But anyway.

03-00:07:13

Dunham:

Back in Arizona. Was there the same kind of sense of competition that you'd had at Grumman, or was it kind of a different nature of work, doing the repair work?

03-00:07:23

Cohen:

No, there was not the heavy competition.

- 03-00:07:27
Dunham: But there was the same sense of sort of nationalism, pride that you were working on these—
- 03-00:07:30
Cohen: Exactly. Some patriotism, yeah. It wasn't based on how many rivets you riveted or fixed or however—no. Or the cloth that you put on that was necessary. You just worked at your pace. We worked fast. Those of us that had a job to do, we did it, but it was not that competition between shifts. They didn't work three shifts a day. We worked for the day. We worked a day shift. We put in a good day's work.
- 03-00:08:03
Dunham: How did your time repairing the planes, how did that come to an end? What was that transition like?
- 03-00:08:08
Cohen: Where, in Tucson?
- 03-00:08:09
Dunham: Yeah. When did that stop? Did you leave it, or the job—
- 03-00:08:12
Cohen: That was when the war ended. War ended.
- 03-00:08:15
Dunham: Do you remember your feelings on—
- 03-00:08:19
Cohen: From Tucson, no. No, I'm sorry. That ended when my mother died.
- 03-00:08:27
Dunham: Oh, right. You went home.
- 03-00:08:28
Cohen: That ended when my mother died, and then I wanted to go stay closer to home. That's when I asked for the transfer to go to someplace so I'll be nearer—
- 03-00:08:40
Dunham: What did you do in the Army when you were in New York then?
- 03-00:08:43
Cohen: In the Army, when I was in New York, I was working—not right away at the recruiting. There, I worked in an office for quite a while, and then the war ended, and that's when I was put into the department to—it's called a separation department. Separation. I was put in that department.
- 03-00:09:09
Dunham: You were in the office for a while, you said. Was that an unhappy time to be stuck in an office?

03-00:09:15

Cohen:

I didn't like that. It's closed-in. But it was a very short time. Then they put me on this recruiting team to recruit people to join the Army. I liked that. We had a big van, a great, big van. I was the only woman on it. We would travel different places in New York, different schools, colleges and high schools, throughout New Jersey and New York. Every day, we'd take the van—

03-00:09:49

Dunham:

Were you specifically recruiting women?

03-00:09:51

Cohen:

No.

03-00:09:52

Dunham:

Were you recruiting women at all or just—

03-00:09:55

Cohen:

Whoever came out to hear us.

03-00:09:57

Dunham:

Were there many women that did come out?

03-00:09:59

Cohen:

Yeah, women came out. Not one woman signed up. The fellows were interested. Some signed up. A couple signed up. It was interesting, because you explained the benefits and all that, but the women didn't sign up. I never had a woman that signed up. A few women came out to listen to the talk that we had, and we had a lot of equipment inside the van to show them, to share, and they walked through the van. I liked that. It was very nice working with these different people.

03-00:10:39

Dunham:

Were any of them surprised to see a woman recruiter for the Army?

03-00:10:42

Cohen:

I think so. In fact, one of the young girls said that she didn't know they had women in the Army. There weren't that many. There really weren't that many during the Second World War. Now, of course, there's a lot more.

03-00:10:53

Dunham:

Did you take particular pride, then, in being one of the few women in the Army?

03-00:10:56

Cohen:

Oh, yeah. Oh, very much so. Very much so. Even today, I still feel that it was a choice that I made. Sometimes you go through life, and a lot of choices we make are not the best, and we realize that. But I think this was a good choice. I really do. They say regret is the cancer of life, and it's true. However, I do regret that I did not stay in for twenty years, but they didn't encourage us then. They really didn't. I don't know that I could have, with the problems at home, but I think I would have liked to. Because I still would have been young. I got

the job with the state of California after—I would have got out in twenty years. I'd still be in my early forties. I got my job with the state of California when I was forty-seven or forty-eight. I could have gotten a job like that, or some other kind of job, and still have the marvelous benefits you have by being a retired person from the military. Because you have so much more.

I had a situation over in Dallas Fort Worth. I was taking a plane from Dallas Fort Worth to Madison, and there was a soldier that had just got back from Afghanistan, that wanted to get on that plane. They announced, was there anybody willing to give up the flight for that person, for that soldier? Nobody said anything. So when she announced it the second time, I called my daughter. I said, “Marsha”—who lives in Madison—“I’m going to give up the flight to give this fellow my seat.” And I did. They have a big USO there. Two, actually. Atlanta and Dallas Fort Worth are the two largest areas where the soldiers are transported. They put me up in a hotel. The next day, I flew out to Madison, and the USO treated me like a queen. They were so excited that I did what I did for the soldier. I was happy to do it. I was so happy myself. In fact, just recently, not too long ago, I was going to Madison, and I was sitting next to a young soldier, nineteen years old, and we conversed. I took his address, and I just sent him a T-shirt from California. I said, “I’m sending you a T-shirt from California.”

03-00:13:34

Dunham: That’s nice.

03-00:13:36

Cohen: I just feel so connected with the military, even today.

03-00:13:42

Dunham: Are there particularly memorable experiences you have from when you were doing the placement of returning soldiers? Because you did that both at the end of World War Two, but then also in your state of California work? Is that correct?

03-00:13:55

Cohen: Oh, yeah. That’s how this manager chose me. She said, “I want you to do placement. I want you to take your time. Take a day, or a month, or two months to place a veteran. Just take care of veterans. That’s all I want you to do.” And that’s all I did.

03-00:14:14

Dunham: How did that work change over the different wars and the different periods that you did it?

03-00:14:23

Cohen: I had several World War Two vets. They’re my age, seventies and eighties. I told them that the choices are not that great, but we’ll do the best we could. In most cases, I was able to place them. Not like a Wal-Mart greeter, which they have the older people, but I got them jobs, part-time. Mostly part-time jobs,

mostly in stores, selling. Some of them who couldn't stand on their feet, I had to try and find something else. I was okay with that. I was pretty successful. They were very pleased. The federal agent that came in was very pleased with my placements. It was easier placing the younger people. I didn't have any World War One veterans at all in my time, but there were quite a few World War Two veterans. Not so many women. All the time since I took that job, I had about five or six women that came in, veterans, and I was able to place them. One wanted to be a waitress, which was very easy to place, because there's always a turnover on that.

I was working out of Glendale, and I would spend a lot of time in the office buildings there, trying to stimulate some kind of work for the young women that wanted jobs in office work. Sales. I had a lot of sales placements. The government would subsidize them. I had one man who had nine children. I worked so hard to get him a job. Finally, I got him a job as a trainee, a machinist. The government will pick up part of the tab for the employer. He doesn't have to pay the whole thing. He was so happy. He came back the next day, and he was literally crying. He said, "I can't take the job." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "They told me that if I take the job, the county said to me that I won't be covered for medical care for my family if I take this job." I said, "I can't believe it." And sure enough, he was right.

03-00:16:43

Dunham:

Wow. Why was that?

03-00:16:45

Cohen:

Apparently they do that. I don't know. The county said that they—because he takes the job. The job wasn't going to cover him with medical care right away. There are a lot of aggravating situations.

03-00:16:58

Dunham:

You've stayed active and connected to many current military. Are there many people in the role that you had now? I've heard a lot, it seems, of the challenges of our returning veterans and their transitions now. What's your perspective on the current status?

03-00:17:18

Cohen:

I was in charge of the veterans. When I got the job, when I was promoted into that position, before that, I was paid unemployment benefits and other types of duties. There was a man in charge. There was never a woman. Here, I had to face a whole board of men, military and ex-military also, and present myself in front of them. I was trying to figure out what to do, because the one that they had for a long, many years was retiring, and they had a lot of respect for him. I thought to myself, now here's a woman coming into the position, which never had before. But I made a presentation. I said, look, I'm not Cy; I'm not him, okay? But I'm who I am, and what you're going to get is someone that puts all their heart into this job. If you give me the chance, you will be proud that I have the job. So I made a very good presentation, and I was very

successful. They were very happy. A lot of them were old-time veterans and not working for the state. I was. They came for these meetings once a month. The head of the department of the federal bureau came. They were very happy. I did a good job. I was really good. I was good at what I did because my heart was in it.

03-00:18:53

Dunham: Have you stayed in contact with folks who do similar work now?

03-00:18:58

Cohen: No.

03-00:19:00

Dunham: What I was getting at was also because of your connection to current soldiers—

03-00:19:02

Cohen: I know that they have a department because I get the bulletin once a month, and it tells you the Veteran Department, how they're doing. I'll show it to you before you leave.

03-00:19:15

Dunham: Okay, yeah. We'll take this off in just a minute. I had one other thing. Had you heard of the Port Chicago explosion in 1944?

03-00:19:25

Cohen: Yeah, I heard about it.

03-00:19:26

Dunham: Did you hear about it at the time? Do you remember your reaction?

03-00:19:28

Cohen: No.

03-00:19:29

Dunham: Later, you've heard about it.

03-00:19:30

Cohen: Later.

03-00:19:31

Dunham: What do you know? What do you remember about it, or what have you heard about it?

03-00:19:36

Cohen: I remember it was just a horrible situation. That's what I remember. It was devastating. Just devastating what happened there, the Port of Chicago. I remember that. I remember reading about it. I forget where I was at the time, and I had heard about it. I know it was just a very devastating thing.

03-00:19:55

Dunham: Did you ever hear also about the mutiny trial that occurred after?

03-00:19:58

Cohen:

Which one?

03-00:19:59

Dunham:

A mutiny trial. There were fifty African-American soldiers who, because of the conditions—there had been this explosion, and then they were asked to go back to work basically right away. It was wartime and the munitions were sort of needed. They essentially were asking for there to be changes in the working conditions. They wanted to guarantee that it would be safer than it was. There was a court marshal trial on Treasure Island, up in the Bay Area, near us. It's not as well-known about the mutiny trial, but that's something—

03-00:20:34

Cohen:

No, there isn't. No, it hasn't been. I've got to put that on the internet. I'd like to get more information.

03-00:20:39

Dunham:

We're doing some interviews focused on that. There aren't a lot of survivors, of course, left from that, but we're trying to track down the last few related to that. In addition to the Rosie the Riveter Park, there's also a national park now at Port Chicago. National monument. A memorial for those.

03-00:20:56

Cohen:

I'd like to see that.

03-00:20:57

Dunham:

It's still an active military base. There's certain times when it's closed, but if you make reservations, if you're coming up our way, I would definitely recommend visiting both.

03-00:21:08

Cohen:

I just came back from Chicago.

03-00:21:11

Dunham:

Actually, Port Chicago is in California, up by us.

03-00:21:16

Cohen:

Oh, that's different.

03-00:21:17

Dunham:

In the Bay Area, but near us.

03-00:21:19

Cohen:

That's great, because I could fly. I have no problem getting there.

03-00:21:23

Dunham:

It's been terrific interviewing you today. Are there any last thoughts you have? In reflecting back on the war and how it fits in the story of your life. I think it's affected you in so many ways. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

03-00:21:38

Cohen:

The only wish I would have had would have been to continue something in the flying field for myself. I think that would have wrapped it up beautifully, but it just wasn't to be. Whether I would have had the opportunity, maybe and maybe not, but I think, when all is said and done, that would have made—the great happiness, for myself personally, is to have been able to fly aircraft. No matter what, whether it's commercial or business or taking people from area to area. I don't care. I just would like to go behind the wheel of an aircraft and fly. People say, why didn't you become a flight attendant? That was not my goal. That was okay. I was a waitress and things like that in my career, too. But to me, of any career I could think of—I've looked at thousands of different careers that are listed for people to pursue—that would have been my greatest happiness. Absolutely.

03-00:22:50

Dunham:

At least you were able to work on the planes that were so necessary and make a contribution that way.

03-00:22:55

Cohen:

I was able to go on the Concorde. It was a big plus for me. I'll probably think of a thousand other things I should have told you.

03-00:23:04

Dunham:

Well, that's inevitable, but let's finish for today. I'll just take the microphones off, and then maybe I'll just take a few shots of your photos, too.

03-00:23:11

Cohen:

Yeah, let me show you. I want to show you.

03-00:23:16

Dunham:

This, you received in 1979. It was in recognition.

03-00:23:22

Cohen:

I was awarded that in—not Livermore. I forget the area I had to go to. It was Northern California.

03-00:23:26

Dunham:

Okay. And this is an artist rendering of—These are the planes you worked on at Grumman in Linden, New Jersey.

03-00:23:45

Cohen:

I loved to watch the airplanes.

03-00:23:47

Dunham:

Here you are, right by the airport. Yes.

03-00:23:49

Cohen:

I love them.

03-00:23:50
Dunham: It's perfect, huh? I was just going to look at these. This is the stamp. I'm going to look at the bigger one of you there. So this is in your Army uniform.

03-00:24:06
Cohen: You want to take it out of the plastic?

03-00:24:08
Dunham: Let me try. This shot is you. This is in Tucson or is this later?

03-00:24:17
Cohen: This was at Mitchel Field. This is Mitchel Field. When I went out with the van, went around with the van. You see the van?

03-00:24:27
Dunham: So when you were recruiting?

03-00:24:29
Cohen: Right.

03-00:24:29
Dunham: Right, okay. This is in Tucson?

03-00:24:42
Cohen: No, this was at Mitchel Field.

03-00:24:44
Dunham: Oh, this is Mitchel Field, too? And those are police?

03-00:24:46
Cohen: Yeah. They covered the field we were on. They were the security.

03-00:24:56
Dunham: Oh, and there's a great shot. How old are you there?

03-00:25:03
Cohen: I guess I was twenty. I like that one.

03-00:25:14
Dunham: And this is, then—

03-00:25:16
Cohen: This is the van that we worked on.

03-00:25:19
Dunham: Okay. How long did you do the recruiting?

03-00:25:23
Cohen: We did it about, I think, five months. About five months. That's my husband.

03-00:25:33
Dunham: How did you meet?

03-00:25:37

Cohen:

Actually, it was a blind date. His sister came into the department store that I was working at. It was raining, and she said, "I have a nice guy for you. Are you going with anyone?" I said no. That was him. I didn't care for him right away. I really fell in love with him during our marriage.

03-00:25:54

Dunham:

Oh, really? You were married before you really—

03-00:25:57

Cohen:

Yeah, right. He was a very good man. He was so good to my father. He took care of my father. He was going to school to learn to become something in electronics. He would come home every day to take care of my dad. I didn't know if it was love or pity. I didn't know if I felt sorry for him because he was so kind, but he was a really good man.

03-00:26:25

Dunham:

That's good. Well, thank you so much again. I'm going to close there.

[End of Interview]