Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

ROBERT E. ASHER

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INTERVIEW

Q: Bob, let's start at the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born and something about your family.

ASHER: I was born in Chicago on the south side in October 1910, which makes me 90 years old. So, forgive me if I forget some things. My parents were married in January 1910, which may say something about their knowledge of birth control, since I was born in October. I am the oldest of four children. My father, Louis E. Asher, was born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1877. My mother was born in Karlsrühe, Germany, in 1883, and came here when she was about nine years old with my grandparents. My mother died of

cancer when I was nine, after a long illness, and left my father with four children, aged three to nine. Fortunately, although he was born in poverty, he became a very successful businessman, and was able to get help to take care of the children and enable him to carry on. I think all of us suffered in some psychological way from this early death of my mother and from her two years of illness in the house. Doctors coming and going, no loud noises from the children, and a rather gloomy atmosphere.

Q: What was the background of your father?

ASHER: He was born, as I said, in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1877, the youngest of five children, in a Jewish family at a time at which there probably were only a half dozen Jewish families in Jackson.

Q: But there were quite a few throughout the South?

ASHER: Yes, especially in Savannah, Charleston and, to a lesser extent I believe, in Atlanta and New Orleans.

Q: It's amazing, they were very much an integral part of the community.

ASHER: But they were scattered. The point I wanted to make was that my parents weren't brought up is any formally religious fashion.

Q: They couldn't get together…

ASHER: In a synagogue? I don't think so. Anyhow, my father's family moved to Vicksburg very soon and then to Memphis.

Q: Do you know what his father was doing?

ASHER: Yes. He was peddling pharmaceuticals, some of which were dubious value.

Q: That's all we had, elixirs...

ASHER: He was apparently a dreamy person, interested in life, but not a great money maker. It was my Dad's mother who had the energy and was determined that her kids go to school, get an education, read books, and so on. My father was told he could go to school until he was 14, so he finished high school in Memphis just before his 15th birthday, with the top ranking in the Memphis public school system. I have an 1892 gold medal to prove it. He loved books – novels, biographies, history and poetry. Not much in art, but he was an intellectual. He read voraciously and accumulated a big library. I had access to the library.

Q: Was your family, would you look upon it as coming from Germany?

ASHER: Yes, his parents came from Germany, and my mother was born in Germany to German parents. She did go to college, which is unusual. This turned out to be very nice

for my father and me because, as a result of her attending Armour Institute, which was later folded into the University of Chicago, my father was able to get good tickets to the University of Chicago football games and take me to them.

Q: Which had a great team then.

ASHER: Yes. As a kid, I was able to sit in the fifty-yard line section at local football games.

Q: How did your father end up in Chicago?

ASHER: He graduated from high school in Memphis. He had an older sister, ten years older, who was married to a businessman in Peoria, Illinois. At the age of 15, Dad went to work, sweeping out the store early in the morning, putting things in order at the end of the day, and so on, for this uncle of mine. He hated the job. My uncle, a hard-working, successful businessman, was not exactly the kind-hearted relative but a demanding boss. The first chance that Dad got, he took his bicycle and rode 100 miles to Chicago, where he had another married sister, with five dollars, a mandolin and a lead that he thought might get him a job as a journalist. He got a job with a magazine, I've forgotten the name of it, it died a long time ago, but it specialized in doing puffed up stories on the big businessmen in Chicago, where fortunes were being made in steel, railroads, meat-packing and merchandising. Early in his career, Dad was able to obtain an interview with Richard Sears, the president and chief guiding spirit of a new mail-order company, Sears Roebuck. Mr. Sears liked the interview so much that he ordered 10,000 reprints to be sent out to customers and offered my father a job in what was then the correspondence department. There it was not just "your order has been received and mailed." Lonely farmers poured out their hearts to Sears. They told Sears about their sick cows, their mothers-in-law, their corn crops, etc.

Q: This was a vital institution for farmers and people living out there. They didn't have radio or anything like that.

ASHER: That's right. They really looked to Sears Roebuck to give them advice and answers. It was a fascinating exposure to problems of ordinary people in the U.S. From correspondent, Dad was soon made advertising manager and in that capacity he put out the first free mail order catalogue in this country. Up until then, Sears and Montgomery Ward had charged for their catalogues. It was a big thing. Dad and Mr. Sears had this idea of "Send no money, get a free catalogue." That was extremely successful and became the norm for mail-order companies.

Dad worshiped Richard Sears, who had great charisma, and soon made him general manager of this upcoming business. In about 1908, Mr. Sears left and Julius Rosenwald became his successor. There was some tension between Mr. Sears and Mr. Rosenwald. Sears was the great innovator, the great imaginer, the bold entrepreneur. Rosenwald was a much more cautious person, who had come through the clothing business to the point where Sears Roebuck owed him a lot of money. My father left at about the same time as

Richard Sears, and established his own mail-order clothing business. It was quite successful until the Great Depression killed the mail-order clothing business. But I think it was dying before then, thanks to the automobile, the proliferation of urban centers, and the ease of obtaining suits, coats and dresses in standard sizes from accessible retail stores

Q: What's background of your mother, and how did your parents meet?

ASHER: I think through a mutual friend, but I honestly don't know. They were mature by the standards of those years. My father was 33 when they got married, my mother was 28.

Q: Your mother, you say, was born in Karlsruhe. What was her family?

ASHER: They were intellectuals, some of them were in banking. A great uncle had established the Frankfurter Zeitung. Her father brought the family to the USA in about 1890. Because he had good contacts in Germany, he was able to establish a novelty business in Chicago. He imported more than pin-cushions and sewing equipment; also humidors, smoking equipment, napkin rings, that sort of thing.

Q: Are they also from a Jewish community?

ASHER: Yes. They were.

Q: Did she have a sort of a religious thing or are we talking about pretty secular people?

ASHER: Entirely secular. I think my father was an assimilationist. Israel Zangwill's "The Melting Pot," published in 1910, influenced the family and none thought of themselves as limited to the Jewish community, although most of their friends were Jewish and they knew that they couldn't buy property in certain areas or belong to anything but Jewish clubs.

Q: What about German community? Was there much of a tie…?

ASHER: Well, there were relatives in Germany and a tie which brought some strains into the family in World War One. My grandfather read German. He read English, too, but he subscribed to the Abend Post, which was Chicago's evening German paper. At that time my grandmother had died, too, and my grandfather was living with us. It was an obvious irritation to my patriotic father to see that German newspaper in Grandpa's hands. I was just a kid then.

Q: There was also some anti-German… I know because my grandfather came from the '48er group and ended up as a very young man, he came out of the Civil War, his name was Franz Lackner, and was a lawyer in Chicago at the time. Here he was, a Civil War veteran of some distinction and all, and people were giving them a rough time.

ASHER: My father's father had been in the quartermaster corps in the Civil War, on the southern side. I think he came over in 1848. Aside from the deaths of my mother and grandparents, I really had a very privileged childhood. Although at the time of my birth my parents were living in an apartment, they moved to a house soon after that. I was brought up in houses.

Q: You didn't happen to know a couple of kids named Leopold and Loeb were friends of yours?

ASHER: I was going to come to that, but I can give it to you now.

Q: Before we get to that, I am trying to gather, what was it like? Obviously, your mother was gone before you were fairly old. Were there around the dinner table times when there was talk about the world, or was your father business oriented?

ASHER: No, he was glad to be away from business. He wrote beautifully, he was very witty, he read omnivorously, and he was interested in the whole world. He was Treasurer or Secretary of something called The Book and Play Club, which put on plays and invited poets and novelists to speak at their meetings. He made friends with a number of the leading writers of the period. Edna St. Vincent Millay stayed with us when she was in Chicago, and a writer who is not as well known now, Ludwig Lewisohn, dedicated one of his autobiographical volumes, "Mid-Channel," to my father who was a good friend and benefactor of Ludwig's. Other literary figures were known to us and seem to have enjoyed staying at our house.

The only mishap that I can recall occurred when a woman pianist was staying with us, and my 10 or 11-year old sister wanted to show the VIP how strong she was by opening the clenched right-hand fist of the pianist. My sister's show of strength succeeded in cracking a finger bone of the pianist, thereby bringing that concert tour to a premature end and causing my father great anguish.

Q: Of course Chicago during that time was a hotbed of intellectual life. But how about you? Were you sitting at the table listening…?

ASHER: Yes and no. At first, the children were fed earlier and sent off to bed.

Q: The "kinder tisch."

ASHER: Exactly. When my parents or my grandparents wanted us not to hear, they said "Nicht für die kinder," and spoke in German.

Q: I got that, too.

ASHER: And that was a signal to listen carefully and pick up as many words as we could. We all sort of learned -- my oldest sister and I -- I had two sisters and one brother, some German, mostly from what we were not supposed to hear. But the conversation at the

table did involve books. My father was pretty strict, you had to get your home work done before you could come to dinner. I was privileged to go to private schools and at one such school, I went from first grade through my freshman year. It was the Harvard School for Boys, a small school, very good at giving you a solid background in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, spelling and Latin. Not very good in awakening your interests in music, art, or athletics. I got my athletics at summer camps.

Q: I am surprised, I would have thought that music would have been… Were the family musical?

ASHER: My mother played the piano but when I became seven she was no longer able to. Music wasn't as important as poetry. My father frequently read poetry to us. We had a couple of famous relatives who were poets, way back on the family tree. On my father's side there was Heinrich Heine, and my maternal grandmother's sister was a very well known poet in Germany who has recently been undergoing a big revival, Else Lasker-Schüler. I am the last living relative who knew her in person, so I get calls about her from time to time because there have been major exhibits of her work and several books about her published. I had lunch the day before yesterday with a professor at the University of Massachusetts, who is the greatest living expert on my great aunt. My younger sister wrote poetry and published a couple of volumes. My other sister is a painter and poet and married to the current poet-laureate Stanley Kunitz. So poetry has been big in our family.

Q: How about you?

ASHER: I've never written any. I love good poetry, I read a lot of it. Just keeping up with my family keeps me moderately busy. I have no gift for writing it.

Q: While you were going through a relatively strict school, were there any subjects that particularly peaked your interest?

ASHER: Yes, I was much more interested in English, English literature, composition, than in math, for example. But the school was rigid enough and strict enough to more or less force you to do equally well in everything. So I got good grades and I don't know what happened to most of my classmates, but one classmate was a youngster named Bobby Franks. He became, by virtue of being murdered in a case called "The Crime of the Century," a figure in history books. Don't know if he would have been otherwise.

I was the class president that freshman year and therefore got involved very early in the case as a good friend of Bobby Franks, who at first appeared to have been kidnaped for ransom. I knew Dick Loeb and my sister was in a birding class led by Nathan Leopold. They'd go into parks and suburbs looking for uncommon birds, and Nathan Leopold was the expert, pointing out to these youngsters recognizable differences between birds they saw. On the Saturday before the murder, Dick Loeb came by and we tossed a ball for a while. He was four or five years older than I. He said, "You ought to come out and see some real ball games sometime." And I said, "Where?" And he said, "At the University

next week." I said, "I don't have any way to get there." To which he replied, "I could give you a lift." I said, "Thank you." But the next Wednesday, when I got home from my dentist appointment, I got a call from Mrs. Franks asking whether I knew where her son was. He was normally home by that time. It was 5:30, six o'clock. I said, I didn't know because I had left school at three o'clock, whatever time we got out, and had gone downtown to the dentist. But I would try to find out for her. And I established the fact that he left school around 3:30, as far as anyone knew, walking south from 47th Street to his home on 51st Street and should presumably have been home by the time she had called. What had happened came out later. It was that he had been picked up by Loeb and Leopold in their car. They were looking for any eligible young person of the group that they knew at Harvard school, including, as they later said, Junie (Sam) Harris, me, Johnny Coleman, Bobby Franks. They really weren't particular. But Bobby Franks came along at the right time, apparently with a tennis racket in hand, and they said they wanted to see him and his racket. He took the ride and it cost him his life. Smashed on the head. They later tried to extract a ransom and it was some days before they were actually caught.

Meanwhile, they had written a ransom note on a typewriter, and I was asked to find out what kind of typewriters we had at school. I was interviewed by the police. That really taught me a lesson I have never forgotten, because I was taken down to the central office and they would say to me, "Now, your gym teacher, was he a friendly man?" And I would say, thinking I was being kind, "Oh, yes, very friendly." "Would he ever put his arm around you?" "Oh, yes. If you struck out or fumbled a ball or something, he would put his arm around you and tell you it was okay." "Get that gym teacher down here for questioning" said the police officer, thinking my comment might prove a homosexual relationship." Then he said, "Your manual training teacher, was he friendly?"

Q: This was the thrust of what they were…?

ASHER: Yes. And I said, "Oh, yes, he would go out with us on Halloween and our parents were satisfied that we were under some kind of control. We rang door-bells, soaped windows, and so on." "Get that manual training teacher down here!" And pretty soon I began to wake up to the fact that I was going to have the whole faculty in jail unless I shut up. So I became more discreet, after they started questioning me also about our male English teacher. But the lesson it taught me was that just by virtue of being questioned, these innocent people had things brought out in the newspapers, the Hearst Press in particular, but the Chicago Tribune and other papers as well, that marked them for life. If they had had a divorce, it raised questions in some quarters about should they be teaching, that sort of thing. And what I learned was, be careful what you say when you are being grilled.

I was told by my father not to talk to any press people, but there was a "boy reporter"-- he had been a "boy reporter" for about 10 years -- with the Hearst Papers in Chicago, named Horace Wade, who came to our house in knee pants with his parents, though it was obvious that he shaved regularly and was a bit more then a boy. He wanted to interview me. I said I would not be able to talk to him, and he said, "Well, I just talked to Dick

Loeb, do you want to check with him?" I called Dick Loeb and he said, "Oh, yes, he is alright, you can talk to him." Loeb and Leopold were brazen. So I gave him a little interview about Bobby Franks and what a nice boy he was.

Then, some days later the story came out. Leopold's eyeglasses were found in a culvert, the prescription was traced to Almer Coe, a well-known optometrist in Chicago, and, through them, to Nathan Leopold. The police got Leopold down and he said he had been with Loeb that day. They seemed to have a good enough alibi, but in fact it was broken and they confessed. Their motive apparently was to commit a perfect murder, get away with it, and see if they could, in addition, collect a $10,000 ransom.

Q: I am trying to remember, was it Leopold who was the driving force behind it, or was it Loeb? One of those was stronger, if I…?

ASHER: I thought it was Leopold in terms of brain-power and dark thoughts. Dick Loeb was a handsome, charming guy. They were both brilliant and they had finished college. I think one of the problems was that they were exposed to courses in abnormal psychology and other adult subjects when they were still children.

Q: Nietzsche, super-man, "you can do anything" sort of…?

ASHER: That's right, if you were determined to. And here they were 18, 19 years old, thinking they could do anything, including committing a perfect murder. And, as in almost all such murders, something comes out. Perpetrators are caught. Their families were very prominent, very well to do. In my neighborhood, our backyard almost touched the Loeb's tennis court. We thought this was wonderful because Dick Loeb and his siblings had been instructed that, if there were other kids in the neighborhood who were playing on the Loeb court, they didn't have the right to send them home, they had to wait their turn. This was supposed to be evidence of how well brought up they were, but obviously, something went wrong. It may have been in letting them go through school too quickly.

Q: Where they graduates of the Harvard School, too?

ASHER: I am pretty sure Nathan Leopold was. As for Dick Loeb, I know his younger brother Tommy was in my brother's class at Harvard School, so I guess both of them were. Dick had gone to the University of Michigan, and they both were at the University of Chicago in graduate school at the time of the murder.

I shifted to the University High School after my freshman year. Not because of the murder but because my father thought the time had come for me to go to a different school. I was certainly willing to try a co-educational school. I loved it. It was the laboratory school of the University of Chicago, now known as the Lab School. Then it was called the University High School. It was peopled largely by sons and daughters of faculty members of the University of Chicago. And it operated under the philosophy of John Dewey.

Q: Was Hutchins there?

ASHER: He wasn't there yet. I later got to know him.

Q: Back to the Leopold-Loeb case. How did this hit you all at the school?

ASHER: It was devastating. No school for few days. This was in May of 1924, and the school annual was already in press, but a page on Bobby Franks was hastily inserted. There was additional turnover of teachers. The school stayed in business, but for a few years, it must have been pretty hard to get new students. It was a small school, so fewer students in the first years would have hurt them badly. Struggling principals and professors used to arrive in old Ford cars from suburbs such as Morgan Park, teach several courses, and so forth. It couldn't help but hit the school badly. The school was accustomed to getting its graduates into the Ivy League schools, and more or less trained them for that. I guess it continued to be able to do that, but as I say, I transferred to another school and enjoyed the change. The University High School was liberating in a sense. It had clubs of all kinds: a Writers Club, a French Club, an Engineering Club.

Q: Again, I hate to dwell, but I might add for anybody who is looking at this, there is vast amount of literature on the Leopold-Loeb case, as it is known. The lawyer, Clarence Darrow, who was probably the most famous lawyer of the 20th century, who defended them and got them life sentences. You must have been following the case?

ASHER: I should say! Nobody could take those newspapers away from us. The court case was of real interest. I was a pall bearer at Bobby Frank's funeral and Mrs. Franks, who was an ardent Christian Scientist, later sent me a little nicely inscribed Christian Science book. My recollection is that Dick Loeb was at the funeral, an innocent looking, neighborhood friend. There was a big turn-out from the neighborhood. Clarence Darrow's whole effort was to prevent his clients from being hung, and get them life imprisonment instead. For Leopold, life in prison meant 30 years of so, during which he did a number of fairly original things, in building up libraries for prisoners, teaching courses and making life more interesting for them. He was finally released to go to Puerto Rico, where he was a social worker for a while. He was already pretty sick by then and didn't live for long. Dick Loeb was killed in a prison brawl, maybe in 1933 or '34, which sounded to me like a homosexual brawl.

Q: Back to University High School, you mention it was based on Dewey's principle, could you explain what that was?

ASHER: I think John Dewey, originally from Columbia University, did a stretch in Chicago when the University was being established, and was very influential and pragmatic. His educational philosophy was to interest the students and then proceed, deepening and widening their interests, so that if you had music ability or wanted to learn more about instruments, musicians, and so on, you were encouraged to do so at the University High School. You were discouraged at Harvard, because arithmetic and

grammar and geography were considered basic and more important, and you could worry about your music later. We had a pretty talented group of youngsters at U. High, with wide interests, access to the University library, and so on. It was easier I thought, as far as demands on the students were concerned, because they didn't require as much homework and compulsory courses. I was graduated at the top of the class of 125 and I don't think I worked half as hard as I did when I was in grammar school, but I had a wonderful time.

Q: How about the most important thing at that time, girls? Did they cross your radar at that point?

ASHER: I should say they did. That was one of the big differences, you had girls in the classroom. Same with clubs. I fell in love with the most beautiful girl in the class but I was too shy to tell her so. And because everybody else was in love with her too, it wasn't until 50 years after graduation, when it occurred to me that we ought to have a reunion -- we had never had one -- that I got her name. She had married a classmate who had died, and I wrote to her and told her that I was in Washington and had gotten her address from my brother-in-law, and now I could tell her how much I loved her in high school, since we both married other people. And would she be willing to undertake, with whatever help I could give her from Washington, to call a reunion of the class? And she did. She wrote back a very nice letter, after she had talked to me 50 minutes on the telephone first. We became pretty good friends in working on the reunion. She wasn't the only girl at U. High. There were other girls that were interesting. One afternoon a week our gym class was devoted to social dancing, that was great. It was a very respectable period for high school relations between boys and girls. Going to movies and holding hands was about as much as you would do. A peck on the cheek maybe and, after several dates, maybe a little "necking," as it was called.

Q: In clubs and other activities, what particularly interested you?

ASHER: You mean, in addition to girls? I was member of the Writers Club, I was on tennis squad, I was the business manager of the Annual. In retrospect, though I didn't realize it at the time, there was some evidence that Jews weren't fully accepted at the school, although they were there in substantial numbers. One reason I say that is because the editor of the yearbook and the business manager were named by the faculty adviser. They were not elected. For the four years that I can remember, they had only Jewish business managers and not a single Jewish editor. Although given my academic record and so on, it was just as clear that I could have been named editor instead of business manager. In fact, I had no talents for business management and no real interest, although I accepted the assignment as a kind of honor and I worked hard at it. I think the record sort of indicates that the authorities believed the school wasn't ready for a Jewish editor.

I'll tell you who was in the class behind me; it was Edward Levi, who later became Dean of the Law School, President of the University, Attorney General of the U.S., and so on. He was a good friend of mine, a very sensitive young man. He started his own literary magazine at high school when he wasn't named editor of the yearbook.

Q: Did you feel any development, anti-Semitism may be too strong a word, but a concern about Jewishness after Leopold-Loeb, since both of them came from a Jewish family? I thought this might have raised…?

ASHER: It did, it raised sensitivity levels pretty high, particularly in the Jewish community. This was terrible. Even going so far as to say, fortunately it was a Jewish boy that got murdered. This was a kind of thought that went through the community. They figured anti-Semitism would have been stimulated if two rich Jewish boys had murdered a Christian.

I don't think that I suffered any discrimination in my whole later life. My father said to me "A number of children in your high-school class have parents who are members of the South Shore Country Club. The South Shore Country Club does not take Jews, Catholics or Blacks, and I wouldn't want you to go there, particularly to mislead your friends by accepting an invitation." Hence I knew that there would be parties to which I wouldn't be invited or wouldn't go if invited. At school there were groups within groups, in which Jewish boys and girls seemed to have their own friends. The resultant criticism was analogous to that now made of blacks in colleges: that they stay together. But they know each other, their families know each other. And they feel comfortable together.

Q: And of course, you mention the Catholics. It's hard, you go back to that era, the Catholics were also considered out of the mainstream. I remember as a kid and a teenager, going under the general admonition, it is okay to date a Catholic girl, but you wouldn't want to marry one. Because then you would have to raise your children as Catholics. My son now is married to a Catholic girl, and I am glad they are married. But it's a different world. It's not quite as so black and white as one might think. People were in different groups.

ASHER: And the whole Catholic issue was a big one in the 1928 election. When Alfred Smith ran for president, my father voted for him. There was a heavy Catholic vote in Chicago, but Al Smith was the loser to Herbert Hoover. I remember the campaign, there were numerous questions raised by Smith's Catholicism, long before JFK became a candidate.

Q: Within your group, and maybe at your family dinner table and all, did the state of Chicago political machine, it was Bath House so and so and Hicky Dick and so and so, and Big Bill Thompson…

ASHER: He was a terrible crook.

Q: He was one that volunteered to smash King George on the nose?

ASHER: On the snout. It certainly was a source of embarrassment to my father, who was a progressive, good government person, with a strong civic sense of duty, and he wasn't happy until Illinois got Governor Henry Horner in 1932 or thereabouts in a democratic sweep. Big Bill Thompson was a Republican. Governor Horner had been a judge and

came in with clean credentials and actually ran a pretty good state as far as I know. Politics was prominent in our home discussions. My father, although a business-man, subscribed to The Nation, The New Republic, The Literary Digest, Poetry, and other magazines. The Literary Digest suffered its virtual demise in 1932 when their poll predicted that Hoover would be re-elected.

Q: I thought it was 1936 when they predicted Landon, I maybe wrong, but I think it was 1936 when they called people and they didn't realize that people who didn't have telephones did vote. In those days not everybody had telephone.

ASHER: Yes. I thought it was '32. Anyhow, they also forecast Hoover overwhelmingly and for the same reason. They didn't realize that people who didn't subscribe to The Literary Digest and who didn't have telephones did vote. And voted heavily for Roosevelt.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

ASHER: 1927.

Q: At that point, you were right at the cusp of the real problems of 1929. Did you feel that you were a part, as we are today, of pretty good times?

ASHER: Yes. Definitely. I think the 1920s may have left a number of people behind, just as the present prosperity has, but the notion was that those were boom times. The stock market was way up in the post-World War One years, the 1920s. The feeling was that people were going to be able to live comfortably forever. The stock market began tumbling in October 1929. It was a terrible shock, resulting in wholesale unemployment and breadlines. Devastating to many families. I don't think my father had any purchases on margin, he was pretty cautious with his finances, so that I could go to Dartmouth College after high school, and spend three years there.

Q: What prompted you to go from Chicago, you were sort of under the wing of the University of Chicago, and all of a sudden off you go to Dartmouth, which was also an all male college at that time?

ASHER: Well, this was a period, at least in our circle, in which the youngsters didn't have the vote. Their parents made these decisions. My father had made a trip east on which he had visited a nephew of his who was at Harvard, and sons of friends who were at Yale, and at Dartmouth. At Dartmouth, two people from Chicago, whose families we knew, took him around and evidently made him think this was a wonderful, quiet, rustic place for someone like me.

Q: Keep you out of trouble.

ASHER: One of the people who showed him around later became my brother-in-law, by marrying my younger sister. Obviously he had made an impression on my father before

that. So Dad sort of said, "Dartmouth is the place for you." Dartmouth had been in Chicago in 1924, to play the University of Chicago, the historic tie football game.

Q: Who was the coach at University of Chicago at that time?

ASHER: Amos Alonzo Stagg, the grand old man of football. I knew his son. He was at the University High School. Stagg was a great coach. He was one of the breed, no longer in existence, of coaches who thought that playing the game decently and cleanly was more important than winning or losing, and the result was a lot of winning teams. He went on from Chicago to coach some Pacific Coast team until he was 100 years old. Some relatively small school but he again turned out great football teams.

Q: Were you all Chicago fans?

ASHER: Sure. I think so. We lived within walking distance of the stadium and of the University. It cast a big shadow over the intellectuals in the area. I think the first choice was do you stay at home or do you go away to college? Going away was thought to be a good idea. Break the umbilical cord. And go east was the norm, rather than to go west, and Dartmouth was an eastern Ivy League college. The principal of our high school, University High, told my father I'd have no trouble getting in, since I had number one ranking in the class. I went to Dartmouth. I wasn't crazy about it.

Q: You were there just for three years?

ASHER: 1927-1930. I had three years of good academic training and I met an old friend there. I knew him before I went, because he was a University High School graduate named Maurice Mandelbaum, and we roomed together in my sophomore year. He later became president of the American Philosophical Association. He was a philosophy major and dear friend, somewhat of a role model, although I wasn't a philosophy major. He was two years ahead of me. At the end of my junior year, he was already in graduate school and was going abroad for a year. I persuaded my father that it would be just great if I went with him. We enrolled in the University of Berlin in the fall of 1930.

I had been at Dartmouth long enough to get a Phi Beta Kappa key, but after the year in Europe I didn't have any desire to go back there. I finished at the University of Chicago and got my master's degree at Chicago.

Q: Let's go back to Dartmouth a bit. When you got there, could you describe the campus at that time, in the academic world, and then student life there at that point?

ASHER: The campus was beautiful in the autumn of 1927. They still had hazing of freshmen. Not very brutal, but making us go to the first football game in brassieres and panties, that sort of stuff. A select group of students, most of whom were better disciplined than I was, had good work habits because they had been to prep-schools, whereas I had been to this modern high school where they didn't make you do things you didn't want to do. Joining a fraternity in your freshman year was prohibited. So we lived

in dormitories, and I remember feeling very friendly with virtually all of the freshmen, particularly the people in our dormitory. And I felt quite let down when they all at the end of their freshman year pledged to different fraternities and nobody except one Jewish fraternity invited me to join. I didn't particularly want to join that, and non-fraternity men were certainly a minority at Dartmouth in those days. Fraternity life was important, it became the social life of those people I thought were good friends of mine. They didn't cut me or anything…

Q: They were just otherwise involved.

ASHER: Yes. This automatically threw the Jewish students more or less together. More than they would have been, had they been pledged to different fraternities. We Chicago Jews at Dartmouth kept in close touch with each other. I, as I said, roomed in my sophomore year with a fellow I knew both from camp in childhood and from the University High School, a very good student, who made a name for himself in philosophy.

Q: What were you studying at Dartmouth?

ASHER: I was studying English literature. I was in the English honors group my junior year. Lots of reading and writing before I went abroad, and I was, and still am, a slow reader. Going abroad, we had very little money but we used it sparingly and got along fine. Spent the summer in France, Belgium and Holland, in little towns, settling down there for days, meeting people, and staying at cheap pensions.

Q: Was this a part of a program or…?

ASHER: No, we just decided if we were going to go to the University of Berlin in the fall -- we didn't realize at the time that universities in Europe don't open until about November 1st -- that we had better get over there and see some of Europe before we had to start school. We both had enough French to get along. We had a marvelous year, what they call a Wanderjahr in German, seeing small towns in Europe. Paris was about the only major French city we stayed in. Most of the time we were in rural areas, Normandy, Brittany, the Pyrenees, and so on. Got to the University of Berlin in September, enrolled, and discovered to our delight, that we could get immediately the student identification cards that permitted holders to get tickets at half price or less at Stadttheaters, museums, and railroad ticket offices. We really had six weeks in which to enjoy the cultural life of Berlin without any responsibilities.

Q: Where you picking up German?

ASHER: Yes. We signed up promptly with a teacher. I had had some exposure in my family and two years of German in college, and

Q: "Nicht für die kinder," so you picked up some.

ASHER: Yes. In Berlin, I carefully chose lecture courses, rather than courses in which I would have to participate. Although in one of the art courses, the professor took us around the major gallery in Berlin, the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, for some enlightening discussions of the works there. The year abroad really opened my eyes to art and to foreign literature, and interested me in them. In Belgium and the Netherlands, I had fallen in love with Flemish art and I loved going to art museums.

Q: This is at time of great political turmoil.

ASHER: Yes, we were exposed to a little of that, too.

Q: Can you talk about what you were observing?

ASHER: Yes. We started asking people about this man Hitler, whose name was already known in Germany, he had gotten 14% of the vote in 1930…

Q: This is the NSDP, National Socialist Democratic Party.
ASHER: Yes, it was his party actually, it wasn't just a vote for Hitler. We asked everyone should this affect our enrollment and so forth, and they all said, "In the country of Goethe and Schiller, Hitler will never get anywhere." The fact is that we were talking to the wrong people. We were willing to believe most of what we heard, although Hitler continued to make headway.

Q: This is '30-'31?

ASHER: Yes. In our political science class, a big lecture course, students grouped themselves more or less in relation to their political beliefs. This was new to me. Communists sat on the far left, socialists next to them, but they didn't get along at all. Catholic parties over in the center, right wing parties on the right side. Beginning early in the course, those who objected to or differed from what the professor was saying scraped their feet, those who agreed applauded. He never could satisfy his whole audience, so there was always this scraping of feet and applause, which made it hard for me to hear what the teacher was trying to say. The lecture room was on a sort of English basement level and there was a big window at the back. One day I turned around and there was quite a bit of excitement, a quarrel going on, and I turned just in time to see some centrist student heaved out of the window by Nazis, or by the right wing group. Nazis thought of themselves as a socialist party, but were really royalists very far to the right. Anyhow, this shut down the class for that day. The victim wasn't greatly injured, because the window was only a few feet above the ground. But it was an indication of how seriously politics was taken by students.

Q: Where as an American did you sit? Right in middle, 50-yard line, or what?

ASHER: Yes, I plopped myself somewhere in the middle. I had a few socialist friends, and my great aunt, the poet and artist that I mentioned, Else Lasker-Schüler, was pretty far to the left, but we were sort of centrist. My roommate didn't take the same course, I

was there on my own. We didn't have to pass exams, I wasn't trying for any scholarship, ours was a year of learning. Wonderful. The news from home, economic news and the news in Germany were, of course, terrible. The depression was really being felt. Germany was suffering before, it hadn't recovered from the wild inflation that followed World War I. I remember my great aunt was really in rags, happy if I could treat her to a sausage or something.

One thing that surprised me when I first went to the University of Berlin, the very first day everybody had a full briefcase. I couldn't imagine how they knew what books and papers to bring to the class. It turned out at lunchtime that they all had sausages and sandwiches and what not in the briefcase and that was what filled it up. I didn't know, I had to go to a nearby coffee shop, learning only later that you could stash sandwiches into your briefcase.

Q: I noticed later when I was sent to Germany as an enlisted man in early '50s, I used to wonder what all the workers were carrying in all there briefcases. We think of the briefcases being… this was made for executives. Of course it's the way you carry your food.

ASHER: Yes.

Q: An awful lot of politics was going on in the beer halls. Did you get into that, the beer-hall culture at all?

ASHER: Yes. We went to Munich for Christmas, and that was sort of a center of Nazi activities. We went to have a beer in a pub that we thought looked good. A waiter came up after we had been there and had one beer and were willing to order another. He said, "You have to leave at eight o'clock." We said, "Why? We want the beer, we are not through in here." And he said, "The Nazi party is having a meeting here, and we are clearing out the place." We were docile enough to go, or maybe smart enough to go. And we did. Sure enough, it filled up with Nazis. Only a few were in any kind of uniform. What they discussed I don't know. There were also Nazi sympathizers at the University, though very few. The Nazis had a big cleansing job before they could be in full power. This occurred a couple of years after we left Germany.

Q: You didn't have to worry, sort of, about the rowing gangs of storm troopers, or the equivalence, SA, anything like that?

ASHER: Not in 1930/31. It might have been quite different in 1932 or 1933.

Q: How about the inflation, what were you seeing?

ASHER: It was terrible. Devastating in its effects. Made living cheap for us, because the dollar was great. You put hundred dollars into a bank there and you could withdraw marks for several months. You could also carry a big wad of paper money. It was a little more stable by 1929. The worst inflation was earlier in the 1920s. But the poverty was

great. It was fertile soil for demagogues. Germany thought of itself as this great enlightened country, but the thinkers were a small minority. They were less observant than they thought. I did find it hard to believe that Hitler came into power almost legitimately. And we had to get all our relatives out of the country.

Q: Were you seeing your relatives there? You were seeing your aunt and all?

ASHER: I had other relatives, my stepmother's. My father remarried in 1929. My stepmother's sister was still in Germany, a ranking tennis player and psychoanalyst. My father brought her, some more distant relatives of mine, and some needy strangers to the U.S.

Q: At that time, were you at all sort of plugged in into the Jewish community in Berlin?

ASHER: Not at all.

Q: Any of the students talking about, "Boy, wait to see what's coming down the road..." Did you have a feeling that a storm was approaching?

ASHER: Yes. Because we found, I can't remember through what contact, probably some relative, a German family who were willing to take in me and my room-mate as boarders. They had some extra space, having evidently had a sizable apartment before economic circumstances required them to take us in. And they were terribly worried about what was going to happen. I think Maurie and I thought maybe they were a little bit hysterical, but they were dead right.

Q: Were they Jewish?

ASHER: Yes. They had a son about our age, a little older, who had some minor job somewhere and a daughter who worked for a Jewish dentist as a secretary/appointments person. They were never heard of after the war, so I suppose they were killed by the Nazis.

Q: You left there in 1931?

ASHER: The end of the first semester in 1931. Went to Italy and there we encountered fascism.

Q: Yes, I was going to say, let's talk a little about Italy. Did you feel you were… you know, sun and all, was that kind of fun at first?

ASHER: Again, as students, it was wonderful. We went to galleries and cathedrals and small towns and got around easily. It wasn't a Jewish family that put us up, but our landlords warned us not to talk about Mussolini in public, not to be heard talking, especially saying anything derogatory, because it was dangerous to do so.

Q: This was, at that point, it wasn't anti-Semitism, you didn't mess with Il Duce.

ASHER: That's right. At least that's my impression of what it was. And we were introduced to a different kind of social life. When I asked the daughter of a man we had met whether she would like to play tennis with me, she said yes and we made a date to meet at four o'clock at the tennis court. To my surprise, her mother was there, and her brother, all chaperones. It was a different kind of social life. Germany was pretty liberated. The girls there were quite forward.

Q: While you were in Germany, particularly Berlin, one always thinks of sort of the period there was a very solid, nice decadent element to Berlin life which for a young student I think would have been great.

ASHER: It was. We were very fortunate. A classmate of Maurie's two years ahead of me but I knew him from Dartmouth, was at the University of Berlin, or had he just finished there? He later became a New York Times correspondent and a fairly distinguished one. A biography of him has just been published by Princeton U. Press. He had a girlfriend, whom he later married, who was a daughter of a German play-write. The divorced wife of the play-write, who was the girl's mother, ran a sort of salon, to which we were invited and gladly entered. If Shep Stone hadn't been in love with this daughter, I could have been. She was beautiful and was good company. Her great charm, I thought, was in her looks and friendliness and so forth. There was also a very liberated Norwegian girl. But I was carrying the torch for a girl in Chicago, who was at Swarthmore at the time. So I was social but not ready to commit myself to anybody else.
Q: How long were you in Italy?

ASHER: Six weeks.

Q: It's also little difficult, I was thinking for Americans, to take politics of another country, particularly a college student, not terribly seriously and have a couple of beers and get up and imitate either Hitler or Mussolini or something. Did you have to worry about that?

ASHER: Yes, we were certainly warned of that, and knew enough to keep quiet. But, I am going back to Berlin for a moment if I may. My great aunt, Else Lasker-Schüler, took me to the opening of a movie based on Erich Remarque's book, "Im West Nichts Neues," a movie made that year.

Q: For "All's Quiet on the Western Front."

ASHER: Yes, that was the English translation.

Q: It is still played on TV again and again, it is classic.

ASHER: While we were at the opening night of the movie, a stink bomb was unleashed, a powerful one, in the movie, and we all had to clear out. Undoubtedly set off by some

right wing Nazi kind of people who did not want to see this peace-oriented film take hold in Germany. We were cleared out onto the streets, waiting for the place to be aired. All I can remember is how outraged my great aunt was. The "frechheit" (insolence) as she called it, of these people who objected to a movie, and gave vent to their objection by trying to prevent other people from seeing it! She was communist oriented in some economic ways but she was a true democrat in the sense that she thought people ought to be able to express themselves freely. If they wanted to go to a movie they should be entitled to see it. And not to be ousted by a fanatic with a stink bomb. That was an exposure I remember distinctly.

Q: In Italy, did you see any manifestation of fascism?

ASHER: Yes, they were marching around. There were many more people in uniform than I had seen anywhere else.

Q: Black shirts mainly?

ASHER: Yes, but many were dressed in gray. There were black-shirted men, but they didn't parade as black-shirts. Mussolini was in charge and he was able to station people all over the place. Rome was well policed by uniformed guardsmen who were being trained for new conquests in Africa and elsewhere. And when did the Ethiopia conquest begin?

Q: That was just about to go, a little later.

ASHER: I think that accounted for a lot of the uniforms. If I had been a year later, I never would have gotten through Europe.

Q: All this, you return when?

ASHER: I returned in June of 1931. I was met at the boat by my love from Swarthmore, and we both enrolled at the University of Chicago that summer, because I wanted to finish my undergraduate career. The depression put a different stamp on playing around for x years of education. I had a wonderful literature course from Thornton Wilder, who was teaching at Chicago that summer, and a fine course from a political scientist from Wisconsin named John Gauss. He was a very inspiring guy. I got a good introduction to the University of Chicago. I found old classmates from University High School also at University.

Q: What were you bringing back as your intellectual luggage from Europe?

ASHER: I was interested in art, literature and politics. Particularly in politics. I got my master's degree in political science, not English literature, although I continued to finish my major in English. After graduation, which was in March of 1932 -- this was really the depth of the depression -- I wanted to write. I went around with glowing letters from English teachers to newspapers, to publishing houses, to bookstore owners. They, all of

them, would say, “These are nice credentials.” They would then pull out from a drawer a long yellow pad, having two, three sheets already written and say, “These are the people we had to let go in the last three years. With all due respect, I would take most of them back before I would take you.” This left me in limbo and I kept saying, “If I can’t get experience, how do I get a job?” Couldn’t get any job, there just weren’t any jobs.

Q: How about your family money? Your father’s business at this point?

ASHER: The depression cost him a lot but he was not suffering financially.

Q: So you didn’t have that particular thing hanging over you, but it was time to get on with it.

ASHER: Yes, I wanted to get on with it. After graduation, I had a year of wonderful experience, because I volunteered to work for the League for Industrial Democracy (LID), thanks to my stepmother’s knowledge of it. She was on the board of the Chicago office of the LID. The biggest project they were doing was organizing the unemployed to understand the relief system, to demonstrate for a better system, particularly for help on rent, and relief payments in cash. Relief didn’t even cover food most of the time. There were evictions, there were people put out on the street with their few possessions. These horrors offered an eye-opening experience for someone who had had a pretty privileged life up until then. To really see how the unemployed lived I got deeply involved.

Q: What was your stepmother’s background?

ASHER: She was born in Argentina of German parents, was a university-trained person, a socialist activist in 1918 demonstrating in Berlin for the end of the war and for socialism. The family head, her father, was an inventor. He invented a gold washing machine when, after six years or so in Argentina, they were in South Africa for another half dozen years. But he came from a banking family. They were wiped out by the inflation. My stepmother came to the U.S. as a governess for the family of a friend of my father’s, and then Dad got her, once she was released by this friend. She entered the house as a governess, but a well educated, literate person with socialist leanings. After a few years she married my father, in 1929. I don’t think we kids were particularly pleased with the marriage, not wanting to share our father with anyone else.

Q: That’s rather difficult.

ASHER: And making unfavorable comparisons to our mother. And so forth. Anyhow, she did have intellectual interests and firm social ideas, and she thought the LID would be a good experience for me. It was.

Q: You were doing this…

ASHER: As a volunteer.

Q: What was the name of the organization?

ASHER: The League for Industrial Democracy. It was headed by Norman Thomas of New York, a great American.

Q: He was. My grandmother's first vote was for Norman.

ASHER: Mine was too. I got to know him and I took him around Chicago. He was campaigning there. I voted for him, organized meetings for him, and so on. My main interest in work being done by the League office in Chicago was organizing something called the Chicago Workers' Committee on Unemployment, which had so-called locals based in settlement houses, in churches, in some public schools but not many, and we had in those days Mexican-speaking locals, Scandinavian locals, Italian…

Q: And possibly a huge Polish population?

ASHER: Big part. Chicago was, I think, the second biggest Polish city in the world.

Q: After Warsaw.

ASHER: Much of it around the stockyards, Jane Addams was…

Q: I was wondering whether in doing this Hull House came in to your orbit?

ASHER: Hull House came very much in it. Its founder and guiding spirit, Jane Addams, was one of my idols. She was a prominent pacifist, a Nobel Prize winner, and a busy reformer. I first met her while I was still a student at the University High School, when a group of us went to Hull House, to see one of America's first and finest settlement houses, and to meet some of its leaders. Five or six years later, when I became involved in organizing the unemployed, Jane Addams was, I think, on the board of the Midwestern Office of the LID. In any event, Hull House became a hospitable meeting site for one or maybe two of the so-called locals, the neighborhood units, of the Chicago Workers' Committee on Unemployment.

Q: You were really in the center of an awful lot of social movement in Chicago at that time, weren't you?

ASHER: Yes.

Q: Everything. Literature, politics, social work, everything.

ASHER: Chicago was an active political center, somewhat of a cultural center, and a crossroads of America.

Q: Architecture, too.

ASHER: Yes, Frank Lloyd Wright had built one of the houses in our neighborhood and the architect/city planner, Daniel Burnham, left his imprint all over the city. At the University of Chicago, in graduate school, I had an economics course from Paul Douglas, an alderman who later became a Senator, and whose wife became a Congresswoman. But at that time her chief claim to fame was not only being the wife of a great economist, but also being the daughter of Lorado Taft, the sculptor who had a fine piece of his sculpture on the Midway. Incidentally, the residue of the Chicago World Fair of 1892 was still highly evident when I was a kid.

Q: Well, still, this is the Museum…

ASHER: …of Science and Technology…

Q: As part of that great white city.
ASHER: Yes. The initial financing for that museum was provided by Julius Rosenwald, the Rosenwald I mentioned in connection with Sears Roebuck. It was called the Rosenwald Museum for a while.

Q: Where you developing a social consciousness of…

ASHER: Yes, at that time.

Q: Because this became quite important for the rest, this is what you were doing.

ASHER: Yes, and here I was, a youngster, running around with the girl I eventually married, not the one who met me at the boat, but the one who was deputy to the director of the Chicago LID office, a beautiful woman.

Q: This came later?

ASHER: When I volunteered, I went down to the office of the League for Industrial Democracy and first met the saintly Quaker who lived in Chicago Commons -- this was a settlement house -- and was in charge of the Midwestern office. He was very eloquent and very moving in telling me what they were doing to give the unemployed a voice. But I kept saying, "Yes, but if I volunteer, I want to do something. What am I going to be doing?" On this, he was sort of airy and vague, and he finally said, "Let me introduce you to my deputy. She's better informed about our daily office activities." He took me in to meet this gorgeous blond, who knew exactly what she wanted me to do first. She said, "We need a speakers bureau. We keep taking advantage of these few friends that we have, to send them out to speak to these locals, and we don't have any real record. I want someone to build up a file. That's my first need."

I liked that kind of thing. I had been in academic life. I started a five-by-eight card file with names of possible speakers, days of the week when they might be called, when and where they last spoke, what the feedback was, whether they were capable of addressing foreign-language locals – we had two or three Italian-speaking locals. Others spoke

Spanish and we could send qualified speakers to them. It was hard for us to find Polish speaking ones, but we did find one or two. While I was organizing our speakers bureau, I kept saying, I have to go to meetings to see these people. I don't want just to sit in the office doing this. So I started going with people whose business it was to go to these meetings, to find out what was going on. Most of the time I went with the beautiful administrative assistant and I promptly fell for her. There weren't any laws against it at the time, but I thought making passes at the boss was probably not a good idea if I wanted to keep my unpaid job. So I concealed my affection quite a while till it was obvious that it was mutual. Then I kept saying I can't get married until I find a paid job. We could sleep together, we could travel together, but I felt I couldn't make a lifetime commitment without a regular source of income.

Q: That was the year. Once you get married, you are in charge and you got all the responsibility… What was her name?

ASHER: Ethel Watson, not Jewish.

Q: What was her background?

ASHER: She was Midwestern. Her father came over to this country from Scotland. He was a golf pro. Her mother was also Scottish. Ethel was born in this country ten months after they were married, like me. Ethel was an only child. Went to school mostly in Kansas City. Her father started as a golf pro, at the Skokie Country Club on the outskirts of Chicago, but then went into designing golf courses. From that, I think through one of the Jewish country clubs for which he designed a course somewhere near Kansas City, he got a chance to buy a couple of early movie houses and he became the owner of three motion picture houses as well as president of the Missouri Motion Picture Exhibitors Association. And Ethel went to the University of Kansas, majored in sociology, and was active in progressive causes there. She married the darling of the sociology department, was married for five years, and was separated at the time we met. Subsequently divorced, so she was a little older than I was.

Q: You mentioned, we skipped a year of graduate school?

ASHER: Yes.

Q: Let's go back to that.

ASHER: Alright. I was out of school for a year, organizing the unemployed, and writing. I wrote my heart out.

Q: What sort of things were you writing?

ASHER: The first thing I did was an article on the Chicago Workers' Committee on Unemployment, called "The Jobless Help Themselves." To my amazement, it was accepted by The New Republic. It was the lead article.

Q: Oh, my God! The New Republic was, of course, a power-house in those days.

ASHER: Yes. And Robert Morss Lovett, who was an English professor at the University of Chicago and active in the League for Industrial Democracy, knew me. Whether he wrote a note to Bruce Bliven or not, I don't know. Anyhow, I sent it sort of blind and I was delighted to have it accepted. I got a copy, with a big caption on the cover, "The Jobless Help Themselves: A Lesson from Chicago," by Robert E. Asher. Moreover, I got paid $32.50 for it. I thought, "Gee, this is wonderful, I can write." I wrote for a new, short-lived magazine called "All Chicago," and they paid $10. I sold some pieces on particular aspects of the unemployment and relief situation. So I really got deeply into organizing and writing.

Q: And also, to put it in the context, this is really… welfare today is institutionalized, social security, everything else. But this was all being created on the ground, and individual cases.

ASHER: Yes. I wrote prodigiously but I earned less than $500, quite a bit less. So I decided I'd better go back to school and get a Master's or Ph. D degree in political science. I was interested in it. The New Deal was just beginning.

Q: That would be '33.

ASHER: Yes, and I went back and got a master's degree in political science, really public administration. Which I was told was the easiest degree for me to get. I found a lousy part time job with the American Public Welfare Association. Not a lousy job, but a lousy employment arrangement under which I was paid $25 a week when I was actually employed and that wasn't very much of the time. A week a month maybe. One day in 1934 my boss, Frank Bain, put his hand over the phone, and said, "How would you like to go to Washington for six weeks?" I said, "Now? It's out of the question." He said, "I've got somebody, Harry."

It was Harry Hopkins calling him for a young fellow who might do a study of how those states that had any money allocated their relief funds to counties and municipalities, to see whether there was anything the federal government could learn from that about allocating its relief funds to states. After he hung up the phone and promised Harry Hopkins that he had somebody, he said to me -- this was on Thursday -- "You don't really have to go on Friday. I think you can wait until Monday." I said, "I've got a job here, I've got a girl, I've got my interest in writing" and so on. He said, "Look, it's for six weeks. Go. If you don't like it, you can come back. There is a little work here and there will be other work, and so on. I advise you to go." I took his advice. I left on Monday and I started the six weeks job with the federal government that lasted for 20 years.

Q: We'll stop at this point. One question, in 1934 when you went to Washington. One question I will put to you though. How did you and your circles view the advent of Roosevelt and was it really called the New Deal then? We'll talk about that.

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Today is the 21st of November, 2000. Bob, you wanted to add something?

ASHER: I told you about the year I had in Europe after my junior year in college. For me, it was liberating, it was eye-opening, it was exciting, it was my chance to learn about art and theater, and do all sorts of things that one didn't do in Hanover, New Hampshire, at Dartmouth College. Since our conversation, I started Arthur M. Schlesinger's A Life in the 20th Century. In fact, I got deep into it.

Q: This is Schlesinger Junior.

ASHER: Yes.

Q: A distinguished historian. His father was also a distinguished historian.

ASHER: He pays a nice tribute to him in this book. Very well done. He talks about his father's original contributions to the understanding of American history. Arthur Jr. was a very precocious youngster and he made a trip around the world with his parents and his brother in 1933/34. He was younger when he made the trip than I was in 1930-31, but the trip was a couple of years later than the one I made. His summing up of his feeling about his year abroad is exactly mine. He says, "For a naïve and impressionable boy, the trip around the world was the best possible education. It widened horizons, stimulated curiosity, strengthened self reliance and along the way, provided an introduction to the political disquiets of the 20th century." That's just the way I feel about the year that I had, when I was attending at least for one semester the University of Berlin and traveling the rest of the time in Europe.

Q: Question I left hanging there, before you went to Washington, sort of within your circle, how was New Deal viewed?

ASHER: To start with the most cynical part, it was the greatest employment agency that had come along since the beginning of the depression. Roosevelt, as you know was elected overwhelmingly in the 1932 election. His was a new voice, hopeful and willing to experiment. Of special interest to those of us at the University of Chicago, he had already co-opted a number of the faculty members to New Deal agencies in Washington to help plan programs and then work there. I think all of us had the notion that we were more likely to get a job somewhere in the new expanding federal government than we would be teaching or researching or in private industry, which as I had discovered, was hiring nobody. I think I told you I had applied for a job with the Tennessee Valley Authority, but before that came through I had this chance to come to Washington for six weeks.

Q: One other question I'd like to ask. Can you tell about your dealings with and view, while you were working in Chicago after college, of the communist party, its goals, ties to the intellectual community that you were familiar with.

ASHER: I encountered some of the leading communists, although they usually didn't admit their affiliation, in the work of organizing the unemployed of Chicago in the Chicago Workers' Committee on Unemployment. The communists also had a parallel effort to organize under their banner Unemployed Councils, which on the whole were much more militant than we were. We wanted peaceful demonstrations. The communists actually wanted martyrs, people who would be physically carried off by the police, while waving banners of "Free Tom Mooney", "Free the Scottsboro boys and Tom Mooney," or in some other way providing copy for The Daily Worker (the Communist newspaper) and hopefully the metropolitan press. Most of the unemployed weren't the least bit interested. I shouldn't say "weren't the least bit interested." They were stirred by the oratory, so there was a constant appeal from the communist group for joint efforts, for a united front with the Chicago Workers' Committee with which I was involved, whose newspaper I launched, and whose activities I was very close to. We did go, I think it was in October 1932, for a united front demonstration with the Unemployed Councils. We got the permits, that's no easy job in Chicago, or wasn't in those days, to parade downtown.

Q: You had rather, it was still very much the ball system, but it wasn't the Bathhouse, what ever his name was, but it was still…?

ASHER: I am not sure that it would not have been equally hard in another city. The unemployed individually were no threat to anybody, but collectively they seemed pretty ominous.

Q: We had the break-up of the unemployed service-men by Douglas MacArthur and company in Washington.

ASHER: Yes. And the longshoremen were striking in San Francisco.

Q: Bridges' boys.

ASHER: Yes. And they were communists. We got our permit on a promise that it would be a peaceful parade through the loop, it would go to Grant Park and we could make speeches there. First there was a lot of argument with the communists about who would be the speakers. Of course we obviously didn't want to hand it to them, and they in turn were very eager to make the most out of this propaganda opportunity. There were one or two instances during the parade in which members of the Unemployed Councils got out of line, trying to climb a lamp post or do something that scared the hell out of the police. I learned from this and subsequent efforts that the communists were working for the Soviet Union and not for the U.S. All of their positions were based on Soviet Union directives. I became sensitive to recognizing the line when I heard it, whether the person admitted it or not, and feeling fairly incensed by their lack of genuine concern for the workers that they were supposedly rallying in Chicago and elsewhere. Also with the distortions in their publications of what was actually going on. I got sensitized long before World War II.

Q: Before you went to government?

ASHER: Yes. I wound up as anti-communist but pro-New Deal. I hadn't been converted easily from my socialist leanings to the New Deal.

Q: One further question on this. Chicago was sort of known as the second city, particularly in intellectual thought and all that, next to New York, Chicago was a center of literature, art and all this. Were you at all plugged in, aware of were, what the French would call "intellectual class" was going with the subject of communism, was it mixed or what?

ASHER: I think it was mixed. My intellectual friends were largely liberal or socialist. My father had many friends among the writers but most of them were out of town, Ludwig Lewisohn, Edna Millay, and other writers. I knew the pacifist group in Chicago and they were very prominent. The Christian Century was one of their leading publications and I wrote a number of pieces for it.

Q: Goldstar, others like that?

ASHER: I don't remember coming into contact with them at all. The University had a communist corps within the student body. I honestly don't know much about the faculty.

Q: It wasn't that apparent, that there was a strong faculty core.

ASHER: No, not like Harvard, where they had debates. In graduate school I learned about those. There were several socialists on the faculty. There was a red-baiting benefactor, Charles Walgreen, who promoted a hearing on seditious thinking at the University of Chicago, but he didn't really get anywhere. By that time Robert Maynard Hutchins was in charge and really made vigorous defenses of the University. I don't think he had to exaggerate to do it.

Q: We are coming to 1934. You are off to the big city of Washington. When you arrived there, how you saw Washington and life in Washington?

ASHER: I arrived in my second hand Chevrolet, which I sold a little while after getting here for what was supposed to be a six weeks job at the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. It had been in business for some months but was still a relatively small organization. Washington was pretty chaotic. Roosevelt knew that for the kinds of programs he was interested in, and wanted the country to benefit from, he probably had to establish emergency agencies outside of the regular civil service framework. Of course the old-line bureaucrats were unhappy about this arrangement and jealous of the higher salaries, in some cases, and the exemption from civil service procedures. I got buried very quickly in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, because I thought I had six weeks only and I'd better get busy.

Q: Where did you stay?

ASHER: I got a room for six dollars a week, or something like that, at 2120 G Street, within walking distance of the Walker Johnson building on 17th and New York Ave., where I was working. It was an awful room in an awful place, but I was only in it from 11:00 PM till 6:30 AM or so, and I was sure I was on a short-term assignment. The assignment was within something called the Municipal Finance Section of the newly established Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The job was to do a report on those states that had any relief money to distribute to counties and municipalities, see what criteria they used -- numbers eligible for relief, urban/rural distributions, wage levels, anything that seemed relevant -- and see whether there were any guidelines that would be useful to the federal government, in distributing funds to the states. It turned out, and didn't take much research to discover, that there were only about a half a dozen states that had any relief funds to be distributed. I got in touch with those people and worked very hard to produce my report. As I worked on it, I began to have visions of it becoming an important guideline but that was not what it turned into. It went, through channels, to Corrington Gill, who was director of Research, Finance and Statistics.

From what he later told me, he took it to Mr. Hopkins, who said, "What's this?" Gill said, "You wanted a young fellow to do a study on how those states that had any relief funds distribute them to counties and municipalities. This young fellow has done a study which you might be interested in. I think you ought to read it." And Hopkins said, "Thank him very much and tell him all the money has been distributed." Every governor was on his doorstep, every senator and every congressman was badgering him. He made the political decision that it was better to get the state people out of Washington, back to where they belonged and to get the program started with a pledge of some kind of money, and as he apparently said to Gill, "What's the difference if Pennsylvania gets a million dollars too much and Ohio too little on the first allocation? Neither is going to cure the unemployment problem. We can always make it up later." In due course, I got from Mr. Gill, "Here is your report. Mr. Hopkins thanks you very much for it but says there is no money right now to distribute."

I said, "Well, I'll go back to Chicago, this was a good experience", and so forth. He said, "You can't do that." I said, "Why can't I? That's the only thing I can do! I've got half of a job in Chicago and I don't have anything here." He said, "It's no secret that we are going to move into a work program and we don't know the occupational characteristics of the people who are unemployed, we don't know what kinds of projects would make the best use of those characteristics, we don't know what kind of wages we ought to pay that would take people off relief but not discourage them from going into private employment. There is just a tremendous amount that a young fellow like you could do to help us!" I said, "If this is the use they make of it, I can do my research in Chicago." He said, "It's a real challenge here, we really want some people to get busy on these programs. We are now paying you at a rate of $1,700 per year, minus 15%", which was the economy deduction. He said, "If we can get you $2,000, would you stay?" And I sold out.

Q: Two thousand was not inconsiderable.

ASHER: That was a beginning professional salary. I told Gill, "I'm going to call up the girl I've been courting for two and a half years and offer her marriage, with this real job." He said, "I can't advise you on marriage, but you've got a job if you can deliver on it."

Q: There was no civil service question at this point?
ASHER: No, we were exempt from the civil service procedures. And I may say that I think it helped enormously in collecting rapidly a very good staff. They got recommendations from people at Harvard, Chicago…

Q: By all accounts, crew that came to Washington at the time, sort of full of piss and vinegar, learning the ropes, but lot of ideas percolating around…

ASHER: They were the people who in better times would have become teachers, actors, writers, publishers and so on. A very distinguished group, actually very young. Anyhow, I called up my beloved Ethel and she said, "Sure, I'll come right after the first of the year." She came and within a few days she got a job at $2,000, at something called the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation, a temporary agency that was buying up the cattle that were killed under some agriculture program, probably the Agricultural Adjustment Program.

Q: To make prices competitive for farmers, to raise them.

ASHER: And the FSRC was in charge of buying them up and doing what they could with the carcasses. So we soon were really in the money.

Q: Four thousand, that was big stuff. I made a calculation, and this is 20 years later when I was getting out of college, that 10,000/year was sort of top grade government salary.

ASHER: That's what Hopkins got.

Q: So we are talking about, you were on your way.

ASHER: I guess. We had a child born in 1936, so Ethel quit work after some months. As I have indicated, it was a very exciting period, the early work relief planning. I got involved almost accidentally in the planning for the Federal Art, Music, Theater and Writers Program of the Works Progress Administration, as it was called at first. The first large appropriation for the WPA had in it 27 million dollars set aside for federal projects without any knowledge at first of what they really wanted to consider a federal project. The rest was to be allocated to the states.

A woman named Hallie Flanagan, who taught at Vassar and knew Harry Hopkins and Franklin Roosevelt, wrote them and said there should be a theater project. There were unemployed actors, scene-shifters, pit musicians, all sorts of people. And plays could be put on in schools and in community centers. New drama could be tried out. She held out

all sorts of possibilities that appealed to Hopkins and to the President. And particularly to Mrs. Roosevelt, who was very active in the fields of education and the arts. The new director at the Museum of Modern Art, Holger E. Cahill, known as Eddie Cahill to all his friends, reported that there were large numbers of unemployed artists. We had an occupational census that we had taken that did indeed show that, at least in the larger cities, there were aggregations of unemployed writers, musicians, artists, theater workers, etc. and that it would be wonderful to have some kind of employment project for them. It would make use of those people's training. But it was a totally new kind of activity for the federal government. There were few precedents.

I went over, for instance, to the procurement division of the Treasury to report that artists needed oil paints in tubes, and some would probably have to be imported, and I was told by this very friendly but critical Treasury bureaucrat, "Sonny, the federal government already buys 50 different kinds of paints. We buy maroon, black and white paint for barns, for railroad ties, for public buildings. We buy it in 10-gallon cans and not in tubes like you want. Honestly, it would be easier to give you a few cans than to go through the difficulties of ordering." I said, "Well, that isn't the way artists work. I can't pour it into tubes and get an equivalent amount of oil-based paint." It took a good three or four days of work over there to try to convince them that that sort of thing was reasonable, given the appropriation for a work program and the implicit promise to put people at work on projects consistent with their previous training and activity. Similarly, for the theater project, we explained that somehow there had to be a little cash available for the time that the leading lady is sick and somebody twice or half her size has to take her place. You have to rush out and get a costume for them, or for curtain tears that you have to do something about it. There are just a lot of emergency requirements. They said, "There is no program that allows a federal employee to carry federal cash around in his pocket." We had to develop a complicated procedure under which there was an agent cashier for those theater projects that were likely to have unexpected financial needs. That guy had to be bonded and he had to account for this money. The proceeds, if any, from the plays did not have to go into the miscellaneous receipts of the Treasury, which was what the Treasury regulations required, but would be available for emergency purchases.

Q: Were you finding yourself immersed in painter activities and dramatic activities, or how was it coming to you?

ASHER: It was coming to me because we had a little unit in the federal project which was called Procedures, Finance and Statistics. We were initially housed in a fine old building, Evelyn Walsh McLean's mansion at 1500 I Street. She also owned half of upper Wisconsin Avenue, and she was glad to rent her downtown residence to the federal government. Working there one Saturday morning we discovered a case of champagne in the basement that helped our weekend memorably. We did work weekends most of the time. In fact, the regular work week was five and a half days. It was not unusual to find people on duty on Saturday afternoons and on Sundays. There was no overtime pay and practically no compensatory time off.

Q: Five and a half days was the norm everywhere.

ASHER: Yes, throughout the federal government. Our unit was supposedly trying to anticipate and collaborate on administrative problems. We were in the same building as the directors of these projects and their deputies and administrative staff, so we could consult daily on the problems. Their aim was to get their programs going and to hell with all these procedures, let's get these people paid, let's put on some nice plays and concerts. The writers project had one wonderful project, which was the preparation of American guides for each state in the union.

Q: And also the River Series, too. I made a project of reading every book in the River Series.

ASHER: Did you? That's wonderful.

Q: Rivers of America it was called.

ASHER: They anticipated some of these problems, but not all of them. Because they thought it was the most natural thing in the world that the musicians, for example, should get paid not only for performing if they were a symphony orchestra, but also for rehearsing. But as far as the federal government was concerned, when I indicated that the musicians were to be paid for rehearsing, I was told, "What the hell, they're supposed to be professional musicians, what do they need rehearsals for?" "Well, symphony orchestras do not come into being for public performance right away, and you have to pay them for rehearsing." "Well, how much rehearsing are they going to do in proportion to when they play?" "That will depend on the director and when he thinks the orchestra is ready. Of course the individual performers in the parks, puppet shows and so on, don't require much training but some of the orchestras are going to be rehearsing quite a while." That was a big battle. There were any number of new problems. And we were trying to keep track of who was actually on the program and whether those people were getting paid. These artists and musicians were not very good at reporting to Washington what the payroll was, and they would say, "My people haven't been paid in six weeks." And we'd say, "Where is the list?" And they'd say, "Ooh, we never sent that in. We meant to." They'd backdate it. That's pretty risky stuff.

Q: You mentioned the lady from Vassar. What was her name again?

ASHER: Hallie Flanagan. She was a drama professor, she knew how to employ theater personnel. She came to Washington as the first director of the Federal Theater Program.

Q: Did you get involved in, was it [Marc] Blitzstein's, the "Cradle Will Rock" controversy?

ASHER: Only the backlash of it. Also there was the play "The Black Mikado" employing a black cast of actors and actresses, which raised many eyebrows.

Q: Yes. This wasn't Orson Wells?

ASHER: No, Orson Wells was in another one.

Q: It was I think "Macbeth," or something, or Upper Jones or something.

ASHER: Anyhow, the theater project, especially in New York put on some very avant-garde material, which was swell, but the lesson I learned was that, if you are working with public funds, you'd better stay within some sort of boundaries of tolerance of educated people, because those who are greatly offended can hurt your projects.

Q: This is still occurring now, with the National Endowment for the Arts. Somebody gets way ahead of the popular, public opinion, sort of enjoys almost tweaking the nose, but Congress is the ultimate producer of the money and they are not appreciative of that sort of thing.
ASHER: Exactly. As I say, it made me wonder, but I didn't get a chance to do any research, although I marked it down as something to study. If you go back to Europe, find out how the Stadttheaters and publicly supported art activities get the freedom they seem to have to produce what they want. We certainly cannot get it under our present system of government.

Q: I might add, I don't know if you've seen it, it came and left in a hurry, but for the researchers, they might want to look at a movie that came out about two years ago, called "The Cradle Will Rock". It talks about Hallie Flanagan, and the whole performance about her fight with Congress, she is an ancient figure there, and then it has performance of the Cradle Will Rock, which is very left-wingish, good music

ASHER: "Pins and Needles", originally financed by the ILGWU.

Q: By the garment workers. Yes, great.

ASHER: That was really fun, and popular. But if you are asking me whether I got esthetically involved, the answer is no. The burden of defending them publicly was on the directors of those programs, on the Assistant Administrator for Professional and Service Projects, and on Harry Hopkins.

Q: Were you playing, or your unit, any role as a watch dog? I mean, too many faces of Lenin creeping into murals, or plays getting a little too much of the workers will arise and clenched fist and all that sort of thing?

ASHER: We were not playing any role officially. We were sensitive to it, because we were involved in preparing some of the Congressional testimony, but we were not substantively involved in program planning or execution. Our job was to make it feasible for the directors to run the programs, namely, to get them financed, not to get their directors jailed for accounting irregularities, to get them the supplies they needed in some way, so that they could function. But in the process, I did get to know those directors and their deputies and their lower level staff, some of the state people, and some of the names that were involved in the programs.

Q: The arts program, of course, is heavy in the literature of the '30s. Writers are writing about other writers, and things like this. What about sort of the mainline, figuring out what jobs to do for the men with the shovels out there. Were you involved in that?

ASHER: No. I had been exposed to that earlier, before I became sort of specialized for professional and service projects. But the pick and shovel side wasn't very difficult. The states all had so much public work that had fallen behind, roads that needed repairing, water and sewer maintenance, buildings to be refurbished, classrooms, everything. They really had a wealth of perfectly eligible work projects they submitted through the state and got approved. Not that there weren't problems. There were. There were particular problems regarding the employment of women. We had an assistant administrator, I think she was originally called Assistant Administrator for Women's Projects, but she eventually became Assistant Administrator for Professional and Service Projects with responsibility for the projects in which eventually I got involved, to take care of craft workers in isolated mountain regions of Tennessee and Kentucky, mattress making, library work. Yes, I got involved in those, but not in construction. We had an excellent Corps of Engineers director for construction projects, Colonel Harrington, who ran a tight ship and eventually succeeded Hopkins, after the first reorganization act. Hopkins went to Commerce, as Secretary of Commerce. I was involved in non-construction projects.

Q: Was CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps, was that completely separate?

ASHER: Yes, it was separate. It was under the Army and it employed only young males, aged 16-25. The National Youth Administration, a unit within the WPA, with which I had become quite familiar, employed women, young girls and well as young men. Not to take them out into the wilderness but to enable them to stay in high school and stay in college, through earning a few dollars a week. If I can get ahead of myself just a little bit, when under the First Reorganization Act of 1939 the National Youth Administration was separated from the WPA and put it into the new Federal Security Agency, Aubrey Williams, previously WPA Deputy Administrator, was made the director of the National Youth Administration. He took me along, with a number of other WPA people, and made me head of Procedures within the National Youth Administration. It wasn't really a new agency because it had been created and functioning within the WPA structure.

Q: What was your impression of Harry Hopkins as an administrator, while he was with the WPA and its precursor?

ASHER: He brought to the government -- and he wasn't the only one --- a sense of urgency that wasn't there under the old civil service, as far as I know. He was brilliant, incisive, but I guess I can say, his arrogance made enemies. He had no sympathy with the unintelligent or the uninformed Congressmen and he kind of showed this and it cost him a lot. He was contemptuous of organizational lines. If he liked somebody here, he would call him up… It turned out to be tremendous boon for me. I might never have met Aubrey Williams, had I not been in the office one Saturday afternoon, when he called up and needed some statistics. He was going to make a speech the following day and I said, "I

don't think there is anyone here to give you that." He said, "You are there. Come over." So I came over with some relevant information and met him, and that's how I got to know him.

I did not have any direct meetings with Hopkins, except when he addressed the staff as a whole. In testimony before Congress, his philosophy was to answer all questions off the cuff immediately and wind up his appearance, rather than to say, "I'll provide you with that information when I get back to my office." When the transcript arrived at his office, we flunkies made extensive modifications to make an honest, forthcoming reasonably diplomatic witness out of our boss. If more than editorial changes in his remarks were needed, we would insert a paragraph in smaller type as a kind of footnote to what had been said. Hopkins burnt himself out terrifically, a constant chain-smoker, he was thin as a rail, but eager to be on top of the organization. He didn't want a lawyer, he was prejudiced, he and Aubrey Williams were both prejudiced, against lawyers. But in those programs, you could argue that some legal talent was needed.

When I went to the National Youth Administration, Aubrey said, "You are going to be my lawyer." I said, "Aubrey, I have a political science degree, I am not a lawyer." He said, "Well, then you can deal with the lawyers in the Federal Security Administration, but I am not going to have any lawyer here on the NYA pay roll." And Hopkins had a little of that. When Hopkins finally did get lawyers, I think probably on a recommendation from the CIO, he got Lee Pressman and John Abt who were both in my opinion communists. That probably only reinforced his notion of why he didn't like lawyers, and it was a troublesome foible.

Q: Did you feel the hand of communism in these programs? Was this a, were you sort of banning, not you, but you were a part of the process…?

ASHER: Well, yes. I knew we had some because I could spot them on the basis of my experience as a socialist in Chicago who had had to keep an eye on the communist-led Unemployed Councils. A few communists worked secretly within the WPA union. The WPA projects, particularly in New York, obviously had some communists on their rolls. I don't think it was much of a problem elsewhere. Maybe in Los Angeles and Hollywood there were communists. The technical attitude had to be, as long as they are doing their job, and putting in the right number of hours, and producing what they are supposed to be producing, fine. Then you got into the arguments in the art program, for example, about what should somebody be painting? And Diego Rivera, who painted in the Rockefeller Center, wasn't on a WPA pay roll as far as I can recall.

Q: I think Rockefeller paid him to paint something and had to paint over because, wasn't it London appearing in Rockefeller Center?

ASHER: And there were few idiocies like that on our programs too. But I would say the main centers of controversy were far and away New York City and next probably California. Those unfortunately were the areas of concentration for unemployed artists, musicians and writers. They eventually made the program vulnerable.

Q: What about dealing with the civil service bureaucracy? Did you completely bypass it or did you have to deal with it? Was this sort of a guerilla movement, up to the '39 period, let's say.

ASHER: Up to '39, yes, there was a kind of guerilla warfare. There were New Dealers in these emergency agencies who were zealots, or thought to be, eager to get their programs going, eager to make a mark, eager to make a dent on the problems that they were created to deal with. And a bureaucracy, the Treasury and Comptroller-General particularly, had the job of guarding the resources of the U.S., seeing that they were well spent and accounted for, within the appropriations, and disbursed at a rate that would carry them through the fiscal year. And this made for a constant battle. A further problem on our work program was with Harold Ickes, who was head to the Department of Interior. "Honest Harold" was a cautious New Dealer who couldn't see construction projects under the less cautious administration of someone like Hopkins, when the real construction program was Bonneville Dam and Grand Coulee and so on. I went to several meetings in the very early days before I got involved in professional projects, arguing that there were two different roles. And I wasn't alone, there was a team of us. We tried to make it plain that the kinds of projects that Ickes was administering under the Public Works Program were great for the country, like those of the Tennessee Valley Authority, but they took a long time planning, they had to do these surveys and tests which, as you know, were a multi-year thing. And we had unemployed people who had to be put to work the next week to eat. The kinds of projects that we were talking about were not major public works, but repairing existing roads and filling potholes, improving the parks, and so on. I think it was always a little guerilla warfare there. I don't think Ickes really believed Hopkins was a dangerous kind of administrator and Hopkins thought the PWA was a fine program, let them alone, let them do their work, but don't let them get in our way.

Q: PWA is…?

ASHER: Public Works Administration. There are now some environmental problems resulting from those projects, but I don't think that they could have been foreseen at the time. Ickes was scrupulously honest.

Q: But a very prickly personality. I think he sort of hated everyone. When his diaries came out, it was full of… it was just his personality more than anything.

ASHER: Yes. Well, I don't want to go into detail. Through his second wife, Jane, my wife and I became very friendly with the family afterwards, long after the WPA.

Q: What about Henry Wallace?

ASHER: I met him very early. He was an impressive dreamer, if I can describe someone that way. He was very well informed on agricultural problems, hybrid corn and things like that which he introduced to Mexico as well as spreading widely in the U.S. He was a

pretty wealthy agriculturalist. His department was responsible for a lot of new programs in agriculture. I don't remember their names but with some of them we had very close relationships because we had rural unemployed who needed work and some of those agricultural programs employed large numbers of people. Wherever there was an agency that could take responsibility for a certain project, WPA shared or allocated it to them.

Q: Did you use county agents who were quite important in the agricultural field for introducing new techniques?

ASHER: Rangers?

Q: Yes, forest rangers, reforestation, right kind of plowing…

ASHER: The national parks were employers of temporary labor. But there seemed to be at least two separate communities in Washington at the time: the New Dealers from various agencies who congregated in evenings in Georgetown parlors and elsewhere, and the old line employees who were ringing their hands and saying, "How can we ever run a respectable government with crazy people like these around?" Some of the New Deal agencies made a real effort to employ people from established agencies. The good republican director of procedures for the WPA had come from one of the old-line agencies and was brought to the NYA as Director of Finance and Statistics. He was excellent, we needed a policeman like that within the WPA. He would say "No" to everything and then had to be persuaded that it was alright. I learned an awful lot from him, because in NYA. I had to clear my procedures with him and the other division directors to get them issued. It's very important, I think, in an agency to build in some in-house critics who will see things differently and point out what otherwise could become a terrible blow in the face.

Q: I can see, and I assume there was a build in cultural class, because, and correct me if I'm wrong, I would imagine the bureaucracy, the civil servants would generally be sort of southern city folk, pretty conservative. I think J. Edgar Hoover is a good example of this. Then. All of a sudden, you city slickers, a great influx of bright young Jewish boys coming in and all this. These are not two cultures that mix very well.

ASHER: That's right. It was compounded, I think, by the fact that the White House itself was interested in the New Deal agencies and perhaps less open, less accessible to these old-line bureaucrats who had to undertake basic activities of the government. They tracked down gangsters, collected the taxes, etc.

Q: Even in the field of foreign affairs, I've done some studying about the history of the foreign service. It was looked upon, essentially not as civil service but the equivalent there of, were looked upon with disdain and bypass by Roosevelt.

ASHER: Yes. He made Cordell Hull Secretary of State but then dealt with Sumner Welles, the Undersecretary. Incidentally, though, on the other side of the picture, was the knowledge that the White House favored and was behind programs like the WPA art

projects. This fact, if used judiciously, could puncture arguments with some of the older, recalcitrant agencies. I could just say, but I didn't want to do it often, "Well, I am afraid that if it gets to the White House that we can't get the paints to the painters, there is going to be an unpleasant reaction." Then they would say, "Let me find a way to do it."

Q: How about the other major player we mentioned, Mrs. Roosevelt?

ASHER: Mrs. Roosevelt was a major player. She was a close friend not only of Hopkins, from New York days, but of the director of women's projects in WPA. Very early in my career I accompanied the woman who was the assistant administrator for women's projects over to the White House to see Mrs. Roosevelt and tell her something about the work we were doing. She was particularly interested in the Resettlement Administration, which had a project in Arthurdale, West Virginia, that produced some craft-ware, and in getting the WPA to do something of that kind in Kentucky and Tennessee and North Carolina…

Q: This is the Appalachian area which had extreme, probably the most poverty stricken area of the country at the time.

ASHER: Yes, it was a prize example of poverty. But its people also had talents. They made their own brooms and they were attractive. They turned out pottery, ashtrays, fireplace tongs, napkins rings, bird houses, and what not. When we reported to Mrs. Roosevelt that these things were being produced, she got interested. I went to one meeting at the White House, I don't know what year it was, with Mrs. Woodward, the Assistant Administrator for Professional and Service Projects, and her assistant, Anne Cronin. Mrs. Roosevelt had also invited the buyers of the proper departments in Macy's, Bloomingdale's and two or three other such places, to see whether they could market our stuff. The meeting reached its anti-climax pretty quickly, when Macy's man said, "Well, how many of these", whatever it was, napkin rings or something, "do you produce in a month?" We gave some figure and he said, "Well, our little department does $2,500 a day worth of business, and we can't run out of things." We couldn't promise to produce hand-made ashtrays and knitted scarves, brooms, fireplace tongs, at a rate that could satisfy Bloomingdale's and Macy's, so we had to go back to marketing mostly by giveaway for use in public buildings, and so on. There was a little bit of genuine marketing in specialty shops. But the answer to your question is that Mrs. Roosevelt was interested in the WPA's non-construction projects and she was deeply interested in the National Youth Administration. She played hostess to our state NYA administrators for a meeting at her cottage at Hyde Park, right after it was built. She knew a lot about the NYA.

Q: There was concern later… I harp on the communist thing, but this was a concern throughout this whole period. The Youth Administration was concerned by some, if I recall correctly, as sort of a hot bad if not communist, left-wing activity. Maybe I am wrong.

ASHER: I think the WPA arts projects were much more so. In the youth program, we had

good clean state administrators. Lyndon Johnson was administrator in Texas; Tom Popejoy, later President of the University of New Mexico; Boisfeuillet Jones in Georgia, who later had a distinguished career in health and welfare and whose son, Boisfeuillet Jones, Jr., became publisher and chief executive of the Washington Post. Excellent people. If there was any communist problem, it was in universities where NYA employees were employed as research assistants to professors, some of whom may have been very far left. With one exception, I don't recall that there was any furor about the NYA Washington Office. The NYA ended by running out of youth.

Q: Talking about, up to '39, because the war begins there in true, you mentioned getting together at night. Could you talk a little bit about the social life? Obviously, you were all working long hours and all, but, you're young…

ASHER: We were young and willing to stay up late, though I was less willing than some. It was a wonderful chance, there were a great number of bright young lawyers brought into the soirees, not from our agency but from other agencies. They were articulate at these evening meetings, so that even if you were working on relief projects, you got some taste of the problems facing the Securities Exchange Commission or the Justice Dept. There were many people who liked being host to the New Dealers and then there would be a suggestion, "If we are going to talk more about that the next time, we ought to bring in so-and-so."

My wife and I were very much involved in one group hosted by Felix Cohen, son of Morris R. Cohen, a very distinguished philosopher. Felix was a lawyer at Interior and a socialist. He collected a number of his friends from New York and included a few of us from Chicago, Wisconsin, and elsewhere. Lively discussions. Usually somebody would pose a problem or indicate what he was doing and other people would chime in with their thoughts about it, trying to keep each other sort of briefed. But it was very social, it was a chance to relax. A lot of it doesn't sound like people today, who turn on the TV and sit on a sofa. Our chairs were uncomfortable, by the way, and the room was usually a little more crowded than it should be. Cigarette ashes were dropping around. But it was an exciting exposure. Sometimes about a new book that was out, published some other place. Sometimes it was to be hospitable to someone from out of town who was temporarily in Washington on consultation or just looking around. Or looking for a job, and some of us might be helpful. Each participant would have a different relationship to the others, but it was a get-together one evening a week, to keep track of where we were going and basically whether we were getting anywhere on getting out of the depression.

Q: This is one of the questions. Sometimes it's been said that all the stuff that Roosevelt did, it really took the war to do it. But people weren't starving, something was happening.

ASHER: A lot was happening. People were eating again and the President with his buoyant spirits had lifted the country's spirits. Cheered it overwhelmingly, as the 1936 election showed. But there were vestiges of depression that lingered on and on, and seemed very difficult to overcome. Areas where there just wasn't any private

employment, so that in a way I have a lot of sympathy for the statement that building up the military defenses and forces of the country did a great deal to reduce unemployment and make the WPA, the NYA and the Resettlement Administration obsolete. Redundant, I guess, is the word.

Q: One set the stage for the other in a way.

ASHER: Very much so.
Q: Were you at all looking at the developments, particularly Nazi Germany, but also in Italy. Germany seemed to be doing pretty well under the first part of Hitler. I am not talking about the nasty stuff…

ASHER: Its rearmament program was one way of beating unemployment.

Q: Yes. Was this something that you were watching, one way or another? What was…?

ASHER: I was watching it personally because I had relatives in Germany and lots of activity about trying to get them out. And I had been a student in Germany. And I was not alone. There were a number of refugees employed by the New Deal, who were connected with the universities, and who'd gotten hired by the New Deal. I think a large number of the New Dealers were concerned about developments in Germany and Italy. But I don't know how the State Department was reacting to it, frankly.

Q: Their role was not great, because they were bureaucrats, and because of the immigration law, essentially, and because if the unemployment in the U.S., was not very responsive to the plight, particularly the Jews, but of others. It didn't respond well. There were some individual cases of councilor office saying, "To hell with this, I am going to give visas", and essentially bypassing the law, but it didn't respond very well. But it represented the will of Congress at the time.

ASHER: I think the New Deal group was much more in favor of loosening the bars, and working on ways of doing it. But the President was very wary. He sensed the isolationist sentiment and understood it, and knew that he had to work very gradually to get the U.S. to recognize that England was either going to be or was already standing alone, and that we had to get busy through our war agencies. I went to one from the National Youth Administration, and had a wonderful opportunity there.

Q: You were there from when to when?

ASHER: I went into the NYA in 1939, when it was established as a separate unit, and remained until late in 1941, right after war was declared. I went in early 1942 into the War Production Board.

Q: Let's talk about the Youth Administration. Was this just a continuation of what you were doing or did you have a different focus?

ASHER: Well, I had a more exalted position, and it was an interesting job. When Aubrey Williams took me there he said, "You are going to be my lawyer, you are going to be in charge of procedures" -- procedures then being understood as rules and regulations for the states -- "but I want you to know I am not going to judge you by the number of procedures or volumes that you get out, but how little. I want the state administrators to have the freedom to experiment and to do one-of-a-kind things. I don't want them to go to jail, but don't bring me a lot of stuff regulating the details of our operations." I thought that was wonderful, to be judged not by what you produce but what you don't produce. That's a very strong position to be in. But one of the first things I had to take in for Mr. Williams' approval were the accounting regulations, and they weren't thin. I brought them in and said, "These are for your signature." He said, "What's this?" I said, "It's the accounting regulations." He said, "Does it give any more pay for the boys and girls?" I said, "No, it just makes sure that they do get paid honestly and that the money can be accounted for." "Well, why are they so big?" I said, " When money is involved, there are a lot of federal regulations." He said, "I am only interested in procedures that do something directly for the kids on the program." I said, "I am, too, but there are certain laws we have to observe and one of the first is to get the accounting straight, before we get into trouble." So he reluctantly signed them.

We were an early example of the employment of blacks in professional capacities. Aubrey Williams, himself a southerner, appointed as Negro Affairs Adviser to the National Youth Administration, Mary McCloud Bethune. Mrs. Bethune, the daughter of former slaves, was a black leader and founder of Bethune-Cookman College. She brought in a very able assistant, Ralph Lanier, I think his name was, though I am not sure. He later became a president of a black college in Virginia. They had a difficult role. They were not in the direct line of operations. But Aubrey wanted them to be treated as a division, so I had to clear procedures with them. They were very good at trying to make sure that the employment regulations, the types of projects and so on, were not of a kind for which blacks wouldn't qualify or wouldn't be chosen. Black schools should get into the program and so on. I think ours was one of the early examples of a real effort to integrate blacks into a federal program, although it was at best a limited success. When I had a chance to employ someone in the procedures section I found a very able black employee, I forget who recommended him to me, quite qualified for the job. Before I had him for more than a few weeks, Mrs. Bethune took him into her shop, which seemed to me almost the opposite of what they were trying to achieve. But his move away from an office close to the Administrator and Deputy Administrator to one on another floor was to the immense relief of our southern Deputy Administrator of the NYA, who sort of cringed when he passed my open door and saw a black employee at a desk in the room where I, too, was working. Before he had joined my staff, a secretary had said, "I wouldn't have to take dictation from him, would I?" I said, "You would." "Oh, I couldn't do that." I said, "I'd hate to get another secretary, but that's what I'd have to do." She said, "All right, I'll do it."

Q: What about Washington as a southern town? You came from Chicago, and this was a segregated southern town, wasn't it?

ASHER: Very much so. The only place that we could eat with blacks was at one of the departmental cafeterias, the nearest one to the WPA and NYA being in the Department of Interior. We could go but even there it was a self-segregated group of blacks, and they tended to be in the elevator-operator positions, things like that. The town was very southern. My wife and I got an apartment, after we could afford it, in a building no longer in existence, at Connecticut and L Streets. Through our interest in the NAACP, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, I knew some blacks. I met Ralph Bunche, who became an Assistant Secretary-General at the UN - he was then at Howard University - and Thurgood Marshall, who became the first black justice on the Supreme Court.

Anyhow, we invited Ralph Bunche over for dinner and somebody warned me, " You'd better make sure that he is allowed to come in the front door, take the elevator, and so on." So I went to the manager of our building, and I said that we were having a professor from Howard University over for dinner on Saturday, that he was black and of course he would announce himself and take the elevator up to our apartment. And the manager said, "Well, he could take the service elevator, couldn't he?" And I said, "No!" He said, "It is absolutely standard here, we have a black elevator operator, but he is in uniform. Your man will be coming in civilian clothes and blacks aren't allowed."

Well, I had another friend who was working for the National Recovery Administration's construction division, whom I had met through friends in Chicago. He was a construction expert and had mentioned to me just a few days before that there probably wasn't a building in Washington that met all the safety and fire requirements. I said, "What's wrong with this building?" "They don't have windows at the ends of the corridors that they are supposed to have, they have one elevator for too many people, there is a cafeteria on the ground floor and its flue doesn't come out properly, it's a fire hazard to the building, and so on." I said, "Are we in any danger?" "Not any more so than people in any other building." So I just filed this absent-mindedly in the back of my head. But when the manager started to tell me about the service elevator, I said, "You know, we've been very worried, a lot of the time -- my wife was pregnant -- about the safety of this building." He said, "What do you mean?" "There are no windows at the ends of the corridors, there are too many people per elevator, there is a very grave danger of fire from the cafeteria downstairs, so I am troubled as to what I should do about this, whether I should report these major building code violations." He said, "Mr. Asher, don't worry about those, we'll get around to taking care of them sometime, all the buildings are the same around here. And you won't have any trouble Saturday with your guest. It will only be once anyhow, won't it?" I said, "No. I also know Walter White, the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People, and he is going to stay overnight with us in another month." He shook his head sadly, but rent-paying clients weren't overly abundant in those days and he didn't want to evict us. His was the standard attitude in Washington.

Q: How about in these groups you were talking about, where they more or less, colored, African-Americans?

ASHER: They were then called Negroes, southerners wouldn't capitalize it, northerners and westerners did. Yes, although now I am trying to think whether this was token representation. We made an effort to mix. Housing patterns were different, that made it hard. By and large the blacks we knew were clustered around Howard University and a few other places. The New Dealers were in Georgetown, Cleveland Park, Cathedral Heights and the suburbs.

The wife of my friend who was the construction expert at the NRA was very active in the NAACP, so through them we met many of the leading blacks in Washington. We saw them socially at the home of Gertrude and Peter Stone. But not at every gathering in northwest Washington. I think part of it was simply that people were too tired at the end of the day to come by public transportation to a place as inaccessible as some of the Georgetown places. Even today, if you have to change buses…

Q: We are talking about the house where this interview is being conducted, very close to National Cathedral.

ASHER: No. At that time, we lived in an apartment and then in Bethesda. The early New Dealers were rhetorically integrationists, but in practice couldn't do much.

Q: What was the background of Aubrey Williams?

ASHER: He was an Alabama-born farm boy, who I guess was a good enough student to get into some college. He became a social worker and dedicated his life to trying to do something to help the poor, the needy, the down-trodden. He and Harry Hopkins both loved horse-racing, and tried to get to the races from time to time, a diversion totally out of keeping with their normal dedication…

Q: Along with J. Edgar Hoover.

ASHER: Yes. But that was Aubrey's recreation. I didn't think he was terribly bright, especially compared to Hopkins, but I appreciated his willingness to lean on other people. He was a good fighter for good causes. He went on afterwards to become an officer of the National Farmers Union. He was an impatient guy, as was Hopkins. Neither he nor Hopkins had any kind of tolerance for staff meetings that lasted for more than about 15 minutes. I thought that was a good thing, though I modified my opinion somewhat later. I came to realize that it was important to keep all the staff up to date. They thought that if they kept their key people informed that that was enough, let them worry about the rest of the crew. Aubrey was a good family man. He had four sons, all fine fellows. Lived out in the country. As I say, I liked him, but it was sort of a business relationship. He was a poker player, which I wasn't, and before I left the NYA, I told him I was going to leave.

He said, "You are cutting off my right arm", all that stuff, and I said, "Aubrey, look, you've got so-and-so and so-and-so, all of whom you play poker with, and see regularly outside of the office, this can't be so terrible." He said, "Those guys I play poker with, I would never expect a serious answer to a serious question from them. I don't think you

should leave yet." I said, "The War Production Board is in business, I've got a chance there, we are on our last legs here." He let me go, in fact he wrote a beautiful letter for me. He was very loyal to his friends and co-workers. He was not a particularly good Congressional witness. Both he and Hopkins had a notion that if they answered all questions in congressional hearings, the transcript would come back and somebody like me or somebody else could then doctor it to make it sound right. If there were figures, we'd just put in an asterisk and say "Subsequent research or something of the sort has revealed that the correct figure should be this instead of this." And the Democratic Congress accepted this kind of tinkering, where sometimes you almost made the person say the opposite of what he had actually said. Hopkins and Williams were not particularly concerned with what we did to the transcript. It was a rush job, and an after- hours kind of thing. I don't think that was really the right way to run a railroad, but we did it.

Q: The war came, December 7, 1941. By that time you were saying, that because of the draft and war production…

ASHER: We deserved to fold up and the NYA was folded up. There probably was someone left there cleaning up accounts for another year or more.

Q: Let's talk about you with, what? You moved to where?

ASHER: I moved to the Office of Civilian Supply in the War Production Board.

Q: You were doing that from early '42 to when?
ASHER: Until the Lend-Lease Administration agreed to establish a civilian supply program in North Africa, which was right after the landings in October of '42 and I left the WPB in about January of '43 to go to North Africa for the Lend-Lease Administration.

Q: Let's talk about War Production Board.

ASHER: The War Production Board was another one of these hastily erected agencies without reference to civil service regulations. It was a two- or three-headed monster initially, when there was both an industry and a labor man at the head of it, until Donald Nelson took over. Leon Henderson, whom I did know because he had done a stretch at WPA, was the head of the Office of Price Administration and of the Office of Civilian Supply in the War Production Board. A strange administrative arrangement, but he was now the head of our Office of Civilian Supply. He had a good deputy, an intelligent, driving deputy, Joe Wiener, a lawyer from New York, as acting head of the Office of Civilian Supply in the War Production Board. Our job was supposedly to protect the civilian economy from excessive drain of personnel and supplies. If you turned every maker of automobiles into producing tanks, nobody would be around to produce cars for hospital needs, police and fire department needs, and so on. We were supposed to protect the civilian economy but, in effect, we were leaders in cutting it back, because the Army and the Navy officers who were making the demands didn't really know much about the civilian economy and they assumed that all sorts of activities were essential, which really

weren't.

If you want me to talk about what I did, I was the representative of the Office of Civilian Supply on an internal committee of the War Production Board, the Clearance Committee, which had to clear all orders for the curtailment of use of scarce materials in various activities. We put steel under allocation, we reduced the production of automobiles severely. It was the best cram course in the American economy that I could possibly have because we were worried about everything from tractors to bread-slicing equipment. We cut out bread slicing by bakeries and then caused more problems because people bought new knives to cut their bread at home. In total, they used more steel than would have been used for slicing at the wholesale level. Probably cut more fingers, too.

That was one less successful order initiated by Civilian Supply. But all these scarce chemicals that I couldn't even pronounce that were absolutely essential for the production of batteries, protection of clothing, etc. were placed under allocation and were allocated by someone in the War Production Board for essential purposes. We'd have to agree as to whether a proposed order made sense. One of the things I learned, that was most important for all of my future, was that there has to be some kind of escape or appeals clause in every order. Sometimes that was my chief contribution, because, initially, we would receive orders that had been drafted by an industry division in War Production Board, and sometimes reluctantly concurred in by the Office of Civilian Supply. Despite the input of industry experts we'd get 10 telegrams the next morning, "What idiot who never saw the inside of a steel mill put out this order? We don't keep our records in this way. We can't possibly keep our inventory this way." And so on. The steel people in the industry division which had drafted the order were supposed to help in those situations. And they did.

I learned that ours was a big country, very diversified, from little shops to big retail establishments to department stores, from little producers to giant producers, and all of them had a role to perform and you had to take account of this when you were establishing regulations. It was very valuable later in life, too. It was hard work to get briefed on each of these things. The WPB standardized stationery sizes and cooking utensil sizes. Paper had been made in a million different dimensions; we decided that the 8 ½ x 11 page should become the standard size. Some types of personal stationery and legal papers could be smaller or larger. Standardization made production much easier, because with fewer sizes manufacturers could produce longer runs and use less labor.
Q: Much of this stayed after the war.

ASHER: Yes.

Q: Paper sizes now, with copiers and all this, essentially there are two, there is letter size and legal size. You did it.

ASHER: And many other economies of the war. A lot of industries brought marvelous displays for us when we tried to cut production. Silk was needed for parachutes and things like that, and therefore we cut out the production of silk underwear, silk stockings,

and so forth. Well, all those clothing people came to the Clearance Committee with their brassieres, panties and other samples, put them on the table for us, showed us that things had to be that way. They made a heart-rending case for business as usual; they couldn't stop their production and infuriate American women.

And shoe polish cans, we wanted to save the metal, but the shoe polish producers made a wonderful case and brought all varieties of shoe polish to our meeting. I was on the Clearance Committee for Civilian Supply, somebody else from the Army, somebody from the Navy, somebody from labor, somebody from industry and somebody from the Legal Division. The shoe polish makers put on a display for us to show there is nothing you could put shoe polish in except metal cans. In other materials it seeps through, it leaks, it does all sorts of terrible things. Rightly or wrongly, they persuaded me and others that they had sort of a case for an exception, but with a ceiling on production. They didn't have to produce shoe polish for every kind of shoe everywhere. It was a great experience, learning about everything from pots and pans and stationery to automobiles and steel and chemicals that were essential in a lot of industries.

Q: Sounds that you had, in a way by having gone through the WPA, you all were trained to say, "Okay, the rules we set wouldn't change it," it was in response to the issue, rather than...

ASHER: Yes, and I think that the War Production Board got a lot of its employees, of course, from the New Deal agencies, many of which were closed or reduced in size during the war. Roosevelt said he became "Doctor-Win-the-War," whereas he had been "Doctor- New-Deal" before. Now we were in the war. And we had to be dedicated to winning it.

Q: You say in early '43 you were off to… what happened?

ASHER: The Lend-Lease Administration was established earlier, to obtain supplies for the Russians and the Brits and other allies. After the North African invasion, a team of people was appointed by the Lend-Lease Administration to go to North Africa. Their function was to see that there were enough supplies to prevent disease and unrest behind the lines. There had been a landing in French North Africa [Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia]. Great Britain had established a headquarters in Cairo. The civilian population behind the military lines was poor, mostly Arab plus some Berber groups in the Atlas Mountain regions. And there was a residue of French civilians.

Q: When you talk about "behind the lines," there were the German lines and then the American.

ASHER: Behind the American. Allied Force Headquarters was established in Algiers, under Eisenhower. We Lend-Lease employees became the import division of the North African Economic Board, which was under Allied Force Headquarters.

Q: You were doing this from early '43 to…?

ASHER: Until early 1944. Again, the war moved on.

Q: What was sort of the atmosphere when you got there? The war was in full swing in North Africa at that point, wasn't it?

ASHER: It was full swing east of us.

Q: In Tunisia?

ASHER: Tunisia was part of our French North Africa Territory, for Lend -Lease. Well, we had one lone airplane that would come over Algiers while I was there. It tried to drop a bomb, but we weren't in any danger in Algiers. Fighting was still going on in Libya, in that area, but ours was basically a holding operation while they got ready to go through Sicily and Italy. One of the early things we civilians were asked to do was to draft a plan. The military with its customary secrecy told us, "Make a plan for an island of about 4,000,000 people in the Mediterranean, we can' tell you the name of it but it should be a civilian supply program for that area." Obviously Sicily, we worked on that.

But in North Africa, there were problems with the French Colons, who had been there for many years. Most were terribly reactionary people. I was billeted with an elderly French family who couldn't have been nicer to me but thought the Arabs were dirt. My landlord told me they were not real people. Then I went down to the concierge in our building, to her tiny room in the basement, and she had pictures of Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill and de Gaulle prominently displayed on her wall. I was talking to her and she said, "They don't know anything about the Arab population here. They don't talk to us, they treat us like dirt." She gave me a real insight into what later resulted in the independence movement.

One of our problems, because we were working largely through French people, was to make sure that supplies given to them were allocated with some concern for everyone who needed those supplies. We brought in some very simple stuff, for instance, basic pharmaceuticals, materials for making crates for packing and shipping dates, some textiles, and so on. I did one study of methods of distributing imported supplies and there was a lot of anti-Semitism as well as anti-Arab sentiment among the French. There were a number of Jewish merchants in the area.

Q: There was a sizable Jewish community in North Africa.

ASHER: Yes, it later became a problem for Israel, but at the time, was a problem for us, in that our supplies were distributed through what were called Groupements, by function. Clothing supplies, groceries, and so on by different groupements. I tried to focus my study on how they made the allocations, to make sure that there wasn't serious discrimination taking place. It was pretty hard to get at.

A humorous experience. I went down deep into the desert territory, where there were some oases and date palms. There was a strip of concrete about 30 feet long and a lot of Arab women sitting around the edge, mostly with their feet in the big pile of dates in the

middle. They were gathering these dates to put into crates to be shipped. I noticed that there were an awful lot of date seeds down there. I talked to the French manager showing me around. I said, "Do they eat a lot of dates before they pack them?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Can you do anything about that?" He said, "I did. I tried to start fining them for the number of date seeds that I found on the ground after they left, and it was wonderful, it ended the problem. But about six weeks later I got letters from my customers in Marseilles who said, 'Tell us more about the two-seeded dates that you're sending.'" They'd eat a date, shove its seed into another date, pack it with the rest, and send it off to Marseilles. I realized that there were all sorts of ways of getting around a disciplinary measure.

Q: We'll stop at this point. I'd like to talk about the next time, before we move on, dealing with the French administration. How we were running things there and maybe there is something else you would like to add to?

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Today is the 29th of November, 2000. The French were nominally, maybe more than nominally, in control where you were, weren't they?

ASHER: Yes. We were in what was called French North Africa, in fact Algeria where the headquarters was, was a province of France. We had responsibility for Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia. Responsibility as Lend-Lease territory, not legal responsibility. We were part of the Civil Affairs section of Allied Forces Headquarters, headed by General Eisenhower, whose political advisor was Robert Murphy, an old line, distinguished, pre-war and post-war diplomat. Murphy had made some of the agreements with the Vichy French by which the allied troops landed rather peacefully in North Africa. One thing in my mind that gave me a lot of respect for Bob Murphy was that he was perfectly aware that a lot of us were critical of the arrangements that he had made with reactionary, Vichy-type Frenchmen. We were working six and a half days a week at that stage and he volunteered to spend a Sunday morning with any people who wanted to ask him questions about how he got to where he got. With no holds barred and no subsequent recrimination, or sending anybody home or demoting them or anything like that. We had a frank, three-hour session. It was wonderful. I forget the details, but what did impress me was the case he made for what he had done.

I'd been there several weeks before this session and I was billeted in an apartment building with a French Colon family, a very reactionary one. They were terribly nice to me because they had a son fighting in French Indo-China and they sort of adopted me as a replacement. Which made it very pleasant. I was able, from the commissary or PX, to bring my breakfast foods home, eat at the apartment, and leave a bit for them. So they got a fresh egg occasionally, or toast and jam which we were able to get from the PX. But, when I went down five floors to talk to the concierge, who was an Arab but spoke very good French, I got a different story about the landings, and was told that just contacting the transport union would have meant that they would either call a strike or make the port of entry easy to enter, not a life-threatening one for American troops. She had pictures of

Stalin, Roosevelt, Churchill and de Gaulle on her wall.

I think there was a real class difference in feelings about how we handled our political relationships prior to the landings, with the French Colons not dissatisfied in the least, and glad to have the troops. Everybody was glad to have the troops there. But the literate non-French population there was critical. But again, as I say, they were so glad to have troops that we got along well. I got to know Bob Murphy a bit, and later in the war, when he was again in Europe. I don't think there were very many divisions within the miscellaneous group of civilians from different wartime agencies that were part of the Civil Affairs section. There were maybe some people from agriculture, who were still Department of Agriculture. As I must have mentioned in connection with that episode of double-pitted dates, part of the job of the Import Division was to see how the civilian supplies that we brought in were being distributed, that they had a system that could be called equitable or at least fair to the minorities and fair to places outside of Algiers and Casablanca. And they did, by and large, have such a system.

Q: Who was running it?

ASHER: It's a good question. Nominally, the French administration. In practice, the U.S. military was probably playing a heavy role.

Q: Did you feel any of the tension… When we, this is a year later when we landed in Normandy, the U.S. had been training a civil government people in Charlottesville, Virginia, and De Gaul heard about this and was going to have none of it. And very quickly made it clear, and by every means possible took over the French government. He was not going to have France treated as an occupied country. Did you run across any of that in Algiers, or was this still the early days?

ASHER: I was there before Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, and those two French generals met in Casablanca, but I wasn't at the Casablanca meeting.

Q: Beautiful handshake, Giraud and De Gaulle.

ASHER: Yes, as I remember it, de Gaulle and Giraud became co-heads of the French Committee of National Liberation in French North Africa, and that did temporarily clear the atmosphere a bit. We found the French prickly to deal with both in North Africa and later when I was on the continent. But Eisenhower was a very good politician. In Algiers we were in joint headquarters with the British, who as you know were more sympathetic to De Gaulle and his Free French than to our albatross, General Giraud. Well, I wasn't high enough in the political negotiations to have any share in all this.

Q: I was wondering if you had seen any manifestations at your level of French- American, and French-British antipathy?

ASHER: The French ran a much better military mess for eating in, and there was always some transportation, when we went deeper into North Africa, to pull in at a French mess

rather than at a U.S. one. We had token, maybe I shouldn't say token representation, but I think that's really what it was, of France in the headquarters at all times. I think they felt they weren't full partners, and they weren't. But they had virtually nothing to bring to the North African Economic Board. That was known and it was a tough period in history. I think de Gaulle got his glory afterwards, as much as he deserved.

Q: Was there a problem with the French, getting out aid, food and all this, to the great majority of the population being the Arab population?

ASHER: That was one of our worries. There were some difficulties, and they may have been greater in things like pharmaceuticals, which were scarce. It might have required some rationing in order to save the most important medicines to serve the best interests of the population. But I think with more U.S. and U.K. personnel, probably, than we needed (until they began to pull out and move to Italy) one was able to keep a fair hand on the situation. There is no question that North Africa was better off after we left than before we came. This was in large part due to the defeat of the Germans farther east than we were. I made some good friends among the French, I could speak a bit of French. They may have been especially pro-American, I don't know. But I didn't detect enormous tension. Maybe it was because I didn't have 20:20 eyesight. I don't think it was a period of enormous tension and I haven't read much that would indicate that it was.

Q: I haven't either. You were there until when?

ASHER: Until December of 1943.

Q: And then where?

ASHER: I was supposed to come home to a job, I was still a Lend-Lease employee. But while I was away, Lend-Lease, the Board of Economic Warfare and the incipient relief organization, the Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations, the nucleus of what later would become UNRRA, were combined into something called the Foreign Economic Administration. I was supposed to get home in a hurry, but I was a civilian; military personnel had higher priorities. I got sent to Casablanca from Algiers in the expectation that I would catch an early troop ship back. But it got delayed for various reasons, and there I was in Casablanca, which by the way can be pretty cold in December, with my summer clothes. Came back on a troop ship that landed in Norfolk, Virginia, after midnight on Christmas Eve.

I went to work in January at the Foreign Economic Administration, which was administratively still in chaos with that change. I became deputy chief of something called the Planning and Control Staff for Liberated Areas, allegedly having had experience in a liberated area. We had a lot of brilliant people, including some refugees who had good knowledge of what might be strategic targets in Italy and Germany and in Western Europe, until it was liberated. But it wasn't a very satisfactory period as far as I was concerned.

Q: You were there from…?

ASHER: January of 1944 until September or October, when I was taken over by UNRRA, to work in its Displaced Persons Branch. The idea being that we would be involved in the repatriation of displaced persons, slave-camp labor, prisoners of war, and so forth, in Europe. Again, there was a delay in transportation. I thought I was going to get to Europe very early in the fall, but the troop ship on which I went didn't get off until November. We landed 10,000 troops and 81 civilians on a bitterly cold day in northern Scotland. It was an interesting example again, of both the advantages and disadvantages of advance planning. For 24 hours before we landed we'd been getting instructions that group A should be on C deck aft at 14:02 hours, group B should be on B deck forward at 14:03, etc. It all seemed to be very well planned, except that they didn't mention the civilians at all. When disembarking began, it was clear after about 20 minutes in the cold that, at the rate we were going, our ship would be tied up in port for 24 hours. So some brilliant young captain shouted out over a megaphone from the shore, "Will all the rest please get off single file!" Then our ship was cleared in no time. And the military personnel quickly found their units and joined them. There was only a limited area in the port there.
The civilians huddled around aimlessly, until a very efficient British Royal Transport officer came up and said, "Who's in charge of the civilians?" And I said, "Nobody, they are on their own on this trip." He said, "Well, somebody's got to be." I said, "You are going to have to appoint someone." He said, "Alright, you are in charge of the civilians." I said, "What do I do?" He said, "You come with me and I give you a chit for your name plus 80 civilians. We reassemble on this train track over there and we are going to leave within an hour. You don't have to do anything, except tell the civilians that you've got their ticket." So he wrote a ticket that said "R.E. Asher and 80 civilians". Then I got up to make the announcement, and there was such a howling wind I thought I'd better make it in several directions. I got on a box and said, "You don't know me, but I am Bob Asher. I have your tickets to London, we go on that train, it goes within an hour, you find yourself a seat and when you are asked for your ticket, you just say 'Mr. Asher has it.'" Then I thought, what else should I do? So I said, "Are there any questions?" My God, 67 hands went up. First question: "We are with the USO [United Service Organization], an entertainment unit. We have these big theatrical trunks, we can't get them out of this ship and carry them over to the train. What are we going to do about that?" I said, "That's a very fair question, let me find out." I went and found out from the same office that issued me the ticket. They said, "We'll take care of that, let them direct us to the luggage." I came back triumphant, thinking I had solved most problems, and said, "Just tell them where the baggage is and they'll get it on to the train. Are there any other questions?" There were still 45 or 50 hands up. "We are nurses and we are not scheduled to go to London. We are supposed to be in Leeds." I answered that off the cuff, "All the trains go to London from here." Which turned out to be true. I was not going to stop everything for that. Then there were still other questions, illustrative of the fact that some people were with the Associated Press, some were nurses, specialists of various kinds, and State Department personnel. All had questions.

Then we were to stop in Glasgow for 50 minutes and these people all ran off in different directions to send a telegram or to telephone somebody and so on. And an announcement

came over the speaker system for R. Asher, "Please appear at such-and-such a spot right away." I went to the place and was told "There's been a little trouble down the line, we're going to leave in 15 minutes instead of 50 minutes, and would you get your group together." I said, "For that, I've got to be on your speaker system." I got on the speaker system, said I was R.E. Asher, and I had misinformed them—I didn't want to say anything about the trouble down the line – that our train was leaving in 15 and not 50 minutes, and I would expect to see them under the clock of the station immediately. Not all of them were under the clock, because they had run off to the telegraph office or some other place and some distraught young lady would say to me, "My friend had our passports and she ran off, and I don't want to get on that train without my passport." I said, "Well, I think they will send the stragglers on the next train, I am sure they will, and I think you should move at the first opportunity." Those people who were supposed to go to Leeds were still uncertain that they couldn't arrange in Glasgow to go to Leeds rather than London. In short, we had all the crises that 81 different people can have when they are on their own in wartime. But a majority got on the train. It was blacked out, cold, unheated, after midnight. I didn't get any sleep at all, I don't think very many people got much.

After we got to London and I reported to the embassy saying that if there were people telephoning for me I could be reached at such and such a place. For two or three days after that, I would meet distraught women on the street, some men too, who said, "Do you remember me, I was worried about this-or-that. I just wanted you to know, because I knew you'd be worried too, that my friend got down on the next train and we're together again." All these people I hadn't been able to recognize because it was pitch dark, but they could recognize me because a light was on me because while I was making my speech…

Q: I want to go quickly back to, when you were in the new agency…

ASHER: Foreign Economic Administration.

Q: Who was the head of it?

ASHER: A wonderful head of white hair named Leo Crowley, who was from somewhere in the Midwest, and who was one of the most indecisive administrators I've ever encountered. He used to listen to both sides very attentively and then he would say, "With all the talent we've got, I'm sure that you can solve this question." And the people had come in order to have him solve it but he fudged the thing. I don't think he lasted very long but he was there most of the time I was there. The head of the Liberated Areas Branch was a fine man though again not a great administrator, Rupert Emerson, a professor from Harvard who knew a lot about international affairs as compared with some of the people in the organization, who were pretty parochial. He wasn't an administrator, but he was a fine person and you could respect him for his knowledge, even though not for his decisiveness. There was a lot of jockeying between these consolidated organizations, they all had more generals than captains or privates and I was frankly very happy to get out of it.

Q: Did you find, a lot of people try to get involved with what you were doing, they want to get over there as quickly as possible because maybe they had relatives in these areas, or they had ties, or just wanted to go see it?

ASHER: I think it was more than that. They thought the war was on in Europe and that's where the action was. If you were anything below the age of 75, you thought if I am not in a uniform being shot at, I at least ought to be over there and let them bomb me and do whatever they were doing. It was still a period of B-1s and B-2s raining in London. The rain of B-1s was practically over by the time I got there, but the B-2s were falling.

Q: These are the rockets…, cruise missiles.

ASHER: Yes, that made no noise. Unmanned missiles of a highly destructive character. The B-1s made a humming noise that gave you enough time to get, not necessarily into a shelter, but at least to get your head covered and get down on the floor or somewhere. The B-2s gave no warning and they were peppering all of London and doing considerable damage. But as everyone knows, the British were very gallant, very well organized. It was depressing to see the number of people housed in subway stations, some of them had been there for months. Homes destroyed. And being so cheerful about it, and so decent. It was really a very inspiring sight. London looked terrible, caverns and fragmented buildings all over the place.

Q: Where did they put you and what were you doing? First, you were in London from when to when?

ASHER: From about Thanksgiving time 1944, late November, until I went onto the continent in January or February, I don't remember which, of '45. The period in London, again, was a delay. It was assumed when I left Washington that we could be on the continent assigned very quickly to SHAEF, which was then called Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces. But the Battle of the Bulge changed that, delayed the movement of the civilians onto the continent. So we did a certain amount of marking time. We went to UNRRA headquarters, I was then an UNRRA employee, daily. They didn't have anything for us to do really, they were staffed already. I thought at the time that they could have done much more to enlist us in the work, in the planning, but they didn't. Shortly after Christmas I was assigned to SHAEF headquarters, which were then in Versailles, just outside of Paris. Paris had been liberated. We worked in a crowded stable called La Petite Ecurie, little stable, wired up in typical American fashion with all its statues of horses having wires stuck to their tails, going across to some other part of the headquarters or off into the field. I was assigned to the Civil Affairs [G-5] part of the SHAEF and, within that, specifically to the Displaced Persons Branch. Early in the year, after the intense battle of the Bulge, things began to move pretty quickly in favor of the Allies.

UNRRA also established, in addition to this sort of beach-head at the headquarters, of which I was a part, a staging area in the town of Granville, in northern France, from

which personnel could be called forward by our unit in SHAEF headquarters to staff displaced persons camps X, Y and Z, in different parts of Europe. Actually one person from our Granville staging area was captured by the Germans near there and held until months later. One of the problems was transportation in Europe. Military units had a monopoly on transportation and these poor UNRRA guys, we would tell them, "You are supposed to appear at some displaced persons camp with your gear and prepare to take over this big community." And they would say, "How do we get there?" We'd say, "Get a truck." It wasn't until after VE day that we actually inherited enough transportation from the army. I found myself one day signing a chit for 125 trucks I hadn't seen. They said, "They are over on that lot." I said, "I don't want to be in charge of this, we must have an accounting division somewhere that can take this." I quickly telephoned around and got somebody who was willing to take my word that there were 125 surplus trucks and that they were now the property of UNRRA. And that we'd have to get them from where they were up to the staging area so that they could be moved back to different camps. Incidentally, we were without the kind of repair facilities that the army has for its transportation. There were some British made trucks, some American made ones – you have to drive on different sides of the truck. We had emergency calls: "Our team of five people, two women and three men, is in a broken down truck here in Belgium or somewhere, what should we do?" We would have to authorize them somehow to find some military or other repair facility there, give them a chit, tell them to sign for it, let the facility figure out how to collect later for the work. It was very hectic.

It was an exciting job, though, because there were, as you know, I forget how many million displaced persons. Really divided into two main groups. Western Europeans -- Scandinavians, French, Belgians, Dutch – dying to come home, eager to come home, expecting to be welcomed there and so on. And Poles, Yugoslavs, and Hungarians, who were very afraid of going back to Soviet controlled territory. One of the principles on which we operated firmly in UNRRA, very firmly in the military too, though I'm not quite sure that we knew it was a principle, was not to repatriate people against their will. This meant that before very long the camps were pretty well empty of Western Europeans.

One of the most thrilling days of my life was the 1st of June, 1945, only three weeks after VE day, when I represented UNRRA at the ceremonies in Paris for the repatriation of the millionth Frenchman. Earlier in the year, shortly after my arrival at the displaced persons branch, the research people in it had been asked to give an estimate of the number of people from Western Europe, broadly defined to include Scandinavia, that could be repatriated per day if the transportation, rail, air and truck, bringing forward supplies into Germany were filled with displaced persons going back. We made an estimate of 30,000 people a day. Our general said to us, "Don't make me look foolish to Eisenhower. Is that a reasonable figure? It sounds awfully big to me." Well, it sounded pretty big to us too, but we said, "It really is. The French railroad cars used to have 40 men or eight horses in them and you could get 40 men going back easily" and so on. Within a few days of VE day, we were repatriating 80,000 people a day. The reason was very simple. These people were not going to wait for transportation by train or bus. They "liberated" every bicycle, every wagon, every mule, every sled, everything they could, including souvenirs, and

started off for home. The roads were clogged. It was inspiring in a way. Tough on them, but wonderful that they didn't wait. They really wanted to get home.

For the millionth Frenchman, when we saw that this was coming up, we sent a delegation of which I was not a member, to Luneburg, a camp in Germany, to pick a good millionth man. We didn't want somebody who was going to be accused of being a collaborationist or anything like that. We picked a gaunt Frenchman from Marseilles. He was perfect. Thirty-seven years old, hollow cheeks, six feet tall, wonderful. We said, and I am using "we" not really including me because I was still in the headquarters while they were picking this man in Luneburg, "You are going to be the millionth repatriated Frenchman on the 1st of June, a week from today. It will be a big ceremony out at Le Bourget when you come in off the plane. The Minister for Prisoners of War, Deportees, and Refugees is going to meet you, give you a kiss, some clothing and a little French money." He said, "That's wonderful, but I've never flown. I'll be as sick as a dog." We said, "In that case, we are going to pick the millionth and first, and you just stay on the plane until you feel better, and let this other guy get off and get all the awards." So we had a substitute picked out and ready.

What we didn't realize was that planes were landing at almost one a minute at Le Bourget, bringing back everything, supplies, personnel and so on. We didn't take the number of the plane that our man was supposed to arrive on, there were plane numbers on the bottoms of the wings. Our assumption was that he was going to arrive at five o'clock. There was an enormous array of military personnel, bands, a Russian general, a British general, an American general, a French general and a French Cabinet Minister -- they had a real Cabinet by then. There was some jockeying as to who was going to be in what part of the line, but UNRRA wasn't competing in that. I was just so happy to be there. Five o'clock and there was a plane up there at exactly five, so the band struck up the four national anthems. It was a hot dusty day. Planes were churning up sand and dirt from the field, it was very hard on the eyes, you could hardly see. We were supposed to salute each of these four national anthems. Then the plane landed and our guy wasn't on it. Next plane we did this again. It was only on the third one that our man appeared. We had heard 12 national anthems by that time, and everybody was exhausted. Our hero did arrive and he got kissed and got flowers thrown to him as he was convoyed into the Gare D'Orsay. Speeches were made and more awards given there. The French turned up in large numbers along the route and it was a very inspiring day.

Q: Did you run into problems with the Soviets trying to get their people back? I know, their troops, it was an awful thing because we were forcing, particularly German, once who joined the Vlasov army, back, or just prisoners, and they were taking back and killed a million.

ASHER: The Russians were full members of the alliance and demanding that their people be sent back, once identified as Russian displaced persons. These people, however, were in most cases absolutely unwilling to go back. We took a firm stand against forced repatriation. As far as I know, we did rather well that at keeping the persons in camp if they didn't want to depart. We didn't send them home against their will, unless it could

be shown that they were real traitors in the sense of the kind of Germans that would be brought to trial at Nuremberg. This the Russian representatives couldn't do of course. The displaced persons were mostly innocent people who'd been swept up by the Germans and put to work for them. The captured Russians were a long time problem. Poles were just about as difficult a problem. Because those who were perfectly legitimate Poles found that half of the country from which they came was now in Russian hands. It was more than a year before all of this was sorted out or inherited by the International Refugee Organization.

Q: What were you during this time?

ASHER: At SHAEF headquarters?

Q: Yes.

ASHER: We were following the maps of where there were clusters of displaced persons either in camps or not. And sending out the instructions on what to do about them: keep them, wait for further instructions, send them home to France and Belgium and Holland and Norway and Denmark when they were ready to go. Asking about the health of these people. There were some that were in terrible health, although by and large I was surprised, I must say, at the relatively good condition people were in. Disease wasn't rampant, starvation wasn't. They had eaten thin rations but in the last few weeks they had beefed up a lot. It seemed a very hectic period for us because we would get these messages during the night, at all hours, "we have a group that's all ready to go, but if we send the truck, we won't have enough transportation left to get the food tomorrow." Things like that. But it somehow worked out. We got them a truck or food from somewhere. The military, while they professed to have pretty well turned over their responsibilities to UNRRA shortly after VE day, were fully cooperative. They had become heavily involved in this job before UNRRA took over and they wanted to see it finished right. As a matter of fact we took on to the UNRRA payroll some of the ablest people in our Displaced Persons Branch who were involved in this. Charles Schottland, for example, a colonel in the military displaced person's branch, who later became, under Eisenhower I think, Secretary of Health Education and Welfare. Other fine military personal were taken onto the UNRRA payroll, more than a couple. Some were eager to get out of uniform and into some civilian capacity, simply because they thought that they would get home quicker that way. We had to hold off a bit, let them find their own level, but the Displaced Persons Branch of SHAEF was integrated, between civilians and military personnel. After VE day we continued to operate fairly well.

I moved to Frankfurt about the middle of June '45, I guess. The SHAEF offices in Versailles were abandoned and Allied Force headquarters was in the IG Farben building, one of the few undestroyed buildings in Frankfurt. I was billeted in a house that had obviously been recently evacuated by the Germans. I felt a little bit guilty when I found a wonderful library at that home, the inhabitants having had to leave without getting a chance to carry with them any of this. But war wasn't kind to people and the military, U.S. and British, felt quite rightly that they had to have some place to billet people. So,

evacuate the Germans and billet the Americans and British. That's what they did. Depending on your rank, you could be pretty well billeted. They may have hired back some of these Germans, as interpreters, kitchen personnel, mechanics and so forth.

I just happen now in 2001 to have some correspondence with a professor of German at the University of Massachusetts, who apparently as a very young child was in Frankfurt and was evacuated at the time when we came in. She has relieved me, we didn't force them to leave at the time of SHAEF's arrival; their house was bombed before and they were already on the outskirts of Frankfurt. Being an occupying power isn't very enjoyable either. Maybe some people found it so, but not those of us who really weren't wounded during the war or hadn't starved, and who moved with the troops in pretty classy ways. It just didn't sit well with me.

Q: Speaking of UNRRA, who United Nations was it at that time?

ASHER: UNRRA's headquarters were in Washington and it had a European Regional Office in London. At headquarters we had a Russian deputy. It took a long time before we got Russian administrative personnel into the field. UNRRA had missions later in Byelorussia and the Ukraine. They were not headed by Russians, in keeping with the principle that an UNRRA country mission should not be headed by a national of that country. The Russian deputy felt, and I think with reason, that he was left out of a lot of decision-making, but the Russians were very troublesome when they were left in. Terribly hard, they just saw things differently. Politics for them was the continuation of war by other means. They had a real grievance that all the Western Europeans were being repatriated while these Russians who should have been at home helping with reconstruction were still in camps, trying to get visas for the USA, Argentina, Brazil and all sorts of western hemisphere places. And getting them. A distinguished American, Herbert Lehman, had been head of the predecessor of UNRRA, the US Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations, and he was succeeded in UNRRA by Fiorello La Guardia, a colorful, brilliant, dynamic, exciting personality to be around, but erratic as an administrator. He would fire somebody in the morning and in the afternoon he would ask for that person and be told, "Well, don't you know he left?" and he'd say, "Get him back, I need him." La Guardia then was given some important post with military government in Italy I think.

His successor at UNRRA was a man named Robert G.A. Jackson, Robert God Almighty Jackson we called him. Do you know anything about him? He was a New Zealander. Very dedicated person who revved himself up for the whole war and postwar effort. In the military service he had been a commander. He thought of UNRRA as a sort of command-post job. He was here in Washington then, it was the headquarters. There was a staff meeting every morning. He usually slept on a cot in his office as though it were important that he be there between midnight and five AM. But the war was over by then. He, I thought, didn't have too good a sense of proportion. He would have on his agenda when he would get to the morning office meeting, I am getting a bit ahead of myself, that the flag wasn't flying straight and somebody should do something about that, and where are those drugs for Albania that pharmaceuticals had promised? That was obviously

much more important than whether the flag was flying straight or not. His agenda always had a checklist on it that somebody important should get busy on right away.

He married a person whom I found utterly charming, Barbara Ward, a brilliant, eloquent, beautiful economist. I didn't really know her at all until well after the war, when I was a founding member of the Society for International Development. Barbara Ward came into the organization early and she was one of our most eloquent people. She'd written a book called The West at Bay, and she later got interested in the development of the less developed countries, in particular Africa. When she spoke honestly about the situation in Africa it brought a lump to my throat, tears to my eyes, a determination to do something. She was wonderful. Her husband I admired in some ways, but Barbara I loved.

Q: When you were dealing with the headquarters, were any nationalities giving you particular problems? Either because of internal politics of their country, or just being difficult to get to go from here to beyond.

ASHER: UNRRA was the first operational international agency. It had a real function in the field. Every country felt that it was entitled to have some personnel at the headquarters. They were willing to supply them. UNRRA needed to build up fairly quickly. It operated at headquarters only in English. This was probably a severe handicap to a lot of people. It was hard, much harder to build an integrated international staff of collaborative personnel, it takes longer, takes more effort in bringing out people at staff meetings, etc. The Personnel Division had people like Mel Spector, who were very aware of this, very good at trying to give us team spirit, so to speak.

I was brought back from Europe to be head of a division called Procedural Coordination to issue UNRRA's regulations and principles and so on. One of the things I tried to do, with the full understanding of Jackson and other people at the top, was to get the clearance and consent of all of the key officers in the organization before getting out some new regulation. You never could get the Russians to agree that people should be repatriated only with their consent. On the other hand, you could persuade them that this regulation was going to apply to a lot of other people, and if you don't go along you are going to slow down the repatriation of people in other countries. There was still an aura, a residue of combined forces, of having together beaten the Nazis, and it carried over a little bit to the UNRA headquarters. I had some good Russian and Yugoslav friends. It was not quite the same kind of intimacy that you got with American and British colleagues. I think that the people at the top of UNRRA were sensitive to this problem, but it's just much easier to pick up the telephone and talk to somebody in English, who will then go along with the proposed action, or want to qualify it, or disagree or something, than it is to explain it to someone brought up in another culture.

Q: The fallout if I understand it, was that you did as much as you could and then you start getting into these DP camps. When I came to Germany in '55, they were no longer DP camps but they were refugee camps. The same thing. They really didn't get rid of them until about around 1960 or something.

ASHER: It went on forever, long beyond the life of UNRRA. There was, what is it called, within the UN…?

Q: High Commissioner for Refugees.

ASHER: Yes, the IRO [International Refugee Organization] took over the displaced persons problem from UNRRA. There was a sense of urgency at home about putting an end to some of these wartime agencies.

Q: As you started this were you aware that no matter what happened you were going to end up with major residue of people who weren't going to go anywhere?

ASHER: I was, and I think others were. I think we realized that we were going to have a hard core of persons who couldn't be repatriated but we didn't know where they should go or what should be done about it. Therefore some of these people who had suffered the most during the war were the last ones to be released from the camps. Many were never repatriated. A handful went to Brazil and a handful to Canada and some other places. Israel came into being and took on a lot of displaced persons who were Jews from the concentration camps. But war in the Middle East created a horde of new refugees. It was – still is -- a very sad and terrible situation, as I said. Thousands of people who suffered badly during the war and had every reason to hope that at the end of the war they would be able to rejoin their families, get back to somewhere, were being held because they wouldn't or couldn't go to where they weren't wanted.

Q: Eventually, Congress passed the Displaced Persons Act. And as you say there was Brazil, Australia...

ASHER: The U.S., too.

Q: ...and other countries were looking to do this. Was this all being in the works while you were there?

ASHER: Just the beginnings of it, because I came home towards the end of 1945 to UNRRA headquarters here. I was here for a year. By that time, that late in the year, it was perfectly clear that we had this large group of persons in displaced persons camps and that those people would have to be maintained somehow. The U.S. did take in what a lot of us thought was an inadequate number, but nevertheless not insubstantial. When you look at university faculties even today, you realize how many of them were refugees.

Q: When you came back you were back in the U.S., '45-'46 in UNRA headquarters?

ASHER: Yes.

Q: Did people there understand the enormity of the problem? Maybe not in your office, but people who you were working with, was it hard to get them to understand it?

ASHER: It was hard but not impossible. By that time transportation had freed up some, and many of these people had for one reason or another gotten abroad and more people were coming back from abroad. It was hard for them to understand the restlessness and the impatience, the dangers imposed by all the factional rifts. One of the problems was, particularly among Eastern Europeans, that there were different political factions within the same camp, and you had to sort of separate them and put them in different camps if you could.

Q: I was giving refugee relief visas in '55 and '56 in Germany, in Frankfurt actually, and we had those from the old Russians, the new Russians, the Yugoslavs, the Croats, the Serbs, all of them hating each other, all of them denouncing each others to be communists or fascists or sometimes both, it was a mess.

ASHER: Very early into the thing, I went to a camp, I can't remember exactly where it was, but it had a lot of Poles. I was charmed by some Polish youngster who was raising rabbits. A marvelous little scene. But, I went in to talk to his parents and they told me, "Communists over here, don't talk to them." We had these divisions and it was clear that we really would be in trouble if we didn't do some separating of them. Even the communist Poles and communist Yugoslavs didn't get along very well together. There were Titoists and there were Stalinists.

Q: Did you find yourself, wither you or your office beginning to lobby Congress, to say, we could take a good share of this, or did you not get involved in that?

ASHER: I didn't get involved in that. I'm not sure that we did this as energetically and as persistently, as effectively as we should have. There was this feeling, and I had it, I think others did, that this international agency shouldn't be lobbying particular countries. It was supposed to be somehow above that kind of fray. It was all right if La Guardia wanted to testify, or Herbert Lehman or Commander Jackson, but it wasn't a good idea for the staff to be running around sheltered in employment by their international status, trying to tell the U.S. Congress…

Q: By this time you really felt you were international?
ASHER: Yes. I felt it in SHAEF, because that was at first bi-national really, but we had enough Frenchmen around to make us think we were an international headquarters. We operated with certain words, we spoke of lorries, we even adopted a few French words into the military vocabulary, and I felt it more strongly when I got home. Here I was in this international agency in Washington. There were others before it, the Pan-American Union and so on, but I was a new convert, I guess, to this international status. I felt it somehow required a little different kind of behavior than when I was in the relief agencies of the U.S., able to write testimony and so on.

Q: When you came back, you were also back, as I recall it, for a long time, at the high point, the feeling that the United Nations is really a solution to world peace and all this…

ASHER: Yes.

Q: You were a part of the core that was going to bring around to end to everything bad.

ASHER: Yes, it was naïve, but we harbored some hopeful feeling that we could. I was, I guess, somewhat ambivalent because I knew right away from the divisions with the Russians and so on that this wasn't going to be one world. And yet, that bright, nice blue flag inspired me.

Q: I was just starting college then, and I know in political science we spent a lot of time studying the United Nations and all, because this was going to be a new world order. It was going to be working, it was going to be benevolent, and all that.

ASHER: Yes, that was very true.

Q: Then what?

ASHER: UNRRA's functions diminished as we had the handful of semi-permanent displaced persons taken over by the High Commissioner for Refugees. I was offered a job by the State Department with the Mission for Economic Affairs in London, which was within the embassy framework. Headed by, when I got the offer, Tom Blaisdell who had been in the War Production Board and I knew him from that. His deputy, Paul R. Porter, and his colleague, Theodore Geiger, were old friends of mine.

The rationale for maintaining a Mission for Economic Affairs was that there were some temporary economic agencies headquartered in London. One called the Emergency Economic Committee for Europe was dealing with certain economic needs of Europe – timber, for example -- long before the Marshall Plan, that is two or three years before it became operational. There was a European Coal Organization, which was trying to allocate U.S. and Polish coal to those countries in Europe that needed it. Another organization called the European Central Inland Transport Organization was trying to deal with the sad fact that Germany had corralled all the railroad cars that were in Europe and repainted them. And the Dutch, the Danes and everybody wanted their cars back. Identifying and allocating them was one of ECITO's jobs. So there were these three "E Organizations" they were called, emergency organizations, with the U.S. represented in all of them by personnel from the Mission for Economic Affairs.

Among the things I was expected to do was to represent the U.S. in the Emergency Economic Committee for Europe, which had representation from these former governments of countries that were based in London during the war, what did they call them -- governments in exile. The executive secretary of the EECE was a very able Englishman named Eric Wyndham-White, who later headed the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade]. So we had an international committee, and we discussed a lot of the economic problems of Europe. Curiously, after trying for weeks to get myself on the State Department payroll from UNRRA, I was told, "Well, you were there all the time. Because when you left Lend Lease they put you into State Department status and gave you a leave of absence for UNRRA. You didn't really have to go through

all this."

Q: You were in London from when to when?

ASHER: From November 1946 to the middle of 1947. Yes, when the UN got going and the Economic Commission for Europe was established, I was a member of the first U.S. delegation, along with Paul Porter of our London office. Under Secretary of State Will Clayton headed the delegation. Our mission, shortly after the first session of the ECE was moved to Geneva. We became the U.S. Resident Delegation to the Economic Commission for Europe.

Q: While you were in London, you were there of course in the early days, but it seems that British took longer to pull out of rationing, even than Germany and France.

ASHER: That's true, they were very slow about doing this. But the result was to put a better lid on the maldistribution of income and privilege, I think. And there was a more orderly process than the black markets that flourished in continental Europe. Not that there weren't any black markets in Britain, but the British were

Q: More disciplined

ASHER: Much more disciplined. And the country was badly damaged. Well, there was damage all through Europe, there is no question about that, but people forget that the British were also trying to become more of a classless society than was true of other places. And the Labor Government was strong. Labor felt reasonably strong in the coalition government under Churchill, and stronger still after the electorate booted out Churchill, to the surprise of a lot of American observers. London was a sort of European capital in those early post-war months. It was exciting to be in for a lot of reasons. Not only the resumption of additional theater and music and cultural programs, the reopening of the museums, but also because there were many European continentals there, and the planning of large scale reconstruction was a big job. The U.S. was considered to be, and rightly, the source from which most of the supplies were going to come. The situation didn't get better, as you know, very quickly, and the Marshall Plan was a belated but marvelous answer.

Q: Were you feeling at that time while you were in London that the U.S. wasn't rising as much as it should have to the occasion?

ASHER: Yes. But, we were also aware that the U.S. itself was sort of demobilizing from a war-time economy. The U.S. population had been denied its automobiles, its brand new tires, its canned goods and all sorts of things, needs that politically had to be satisfied. Roosevelt's sudden death was mourned throughout the world and Truman hadn't come in with a golden reputation.

Q: No. You stopped Lend Lease right there after the war had ended, the ship's turned around.

ASHER: Truman was very anxious to get back to what he thought was normalcy. And it was possible to do so in the U.S. He wasn't eager to be the first president not to let private relief do the job abroad, as Herbert Hoover had done after World War One. So the programs of the temporary agencies were somewhat starved. But, one knew that you couldn't turn the government around in two weeks. I think most people were reasonably patient. There was a Greek-Turkish aid program in 1946-47, I think, but nothing called the Marshall Plan until well after that. There was plenty to do in London and some friendships were made that served us well when we did get into the Marshall Plan period, or when we began work in Geneva or UN Headquarters in New York. For several years I kept running into people I had known in London.
Q: What was really built up was an international cadre.

ASHER: Yes. These three emergency organizations in London were folded into the Economic Commission for Europe when it came into being as the first regional organization of the UN Economic and Social Council. As I recall it now, I think it was in the spring of 1946 that the UN sent abroad a mission called the Temporary Subcommission on Devastated Areas. One group came to London. One part went to Asia. The London team was headed by a good economist, Isador Lubin, who had been a Commissioner for Labor Statistics under Roosevelt and then an anonymous assistant at the White House. I worked with them for several days. Our people were headquartered at the Mission for Economic Affairs in the London Embassy and, because they had worked with the so-called "E Organizations," were becoming well-informed on the needs of Europe, the supplies available, which were shortest, what kinds of priorities should be established, and so on…

Q: When you are talking about Europe you are talking about what we refer today as "whole Europe," including the Soviet Union?

ASHER: Yes. But it was pretty clear from the UNRRA experience that the Soviets were going to demand things but they wouldn't be willing to supply information, to have missions come to them to ask questions, and so on. If all this could be arranged under the U.N., it might give them some cover and some protection, but basically they weren't prepared for the U.N. personnel either. They were sovereignty-conscious to the n-th degree. Very difficult to work with.

Q: Then you went to Geneva, and that was what, '47?

ASHER: Yes. The first session of the Economic Commission for Europe was in May, I think, 1947. We had high hopes for it.
Q: You were on the American delegation?

ASHER: Yes, on the U.S. delegation. Low man, far down on the ladder. We had, as I said, pretty high hopes, especially when Trygve Lie, the first Secretary General of the UN, named Gunnar Myrdal as the Executive Secretary of the Economic Commission for Europe. Myrdal had a good reputation in the U.S. as the senior author of "The American

Dilemma."

Q: Race.

ASHER: Yes, race. And as a sociologist and economist. He later won a Nobel Prize. Both of them did, he and his wife Alva Myrdal. He took the ECE job on the assumption that the UN would be the agency collecting and distributing relief for the devastated areas of Europe. But the Russians made that impossible. It was clear from the first session of the ECE. They were on the minority side on everything and holding up decisions and action. They made long speeches, some of which were irrelevant, some of which were relevant from their point of view, but they did not want some other organization to have the say. The result was that Clayton and the people at the head of the U.S. delegation were persuaded by the end of the first session that if the U.S. were to get involved in a major relief program, it wouldn't be through the UN. And that was not an arbitrary decision. It was pretty well forced upon us by the behavior of the Eastern Europeans at international meetings. The beginning for me was my experience at UNRRA, but that experience was dramatically enhanced in the UN itself when that got underway.

The U.S. decision in a way set the Economic Commission for Europe adrift. However, it not only stayed in being, but it became a model for the Economic Commission for Latin America. And if those two regions had economic commissions, there had to be an Economic Commission for Asia, and eventually, an Economic Commission for Africa. That's how international politics works, even though those others had to some extent less rationale for coming into being when they did.

The Economic Commission for Europe became somewhat of a backwater as the main drama for European recovery moved to Paris and the Marshall Plan. Fortunately, Averell Harriman was named both the US Special Representative in Europe and U.S. Representative on the Economic Commission for Europe. So he called on us to keep the two organizations from getting into conflict, and find things for the Economic Commission for Europe to do that wouldn't get in the way of the Marshall Plan, but were worth doing. Among other things, the ECE standardized the road signs for Europe and the rest of the world. One doesn't realize that all those symbols that go with "STOP, Dangerous Crossing, Slow-down, Pedestrian Crossing" and so on, were not in being until the Economic Commission for Europe got busy creating and standardizing them.

After Paul R. Porter, our chief in Geneva, left to become Marshall Plan director for Greece, I inherited the US Resident Delegation to the Economic Commission for Europe. One day our road transport expert came to me with a wonderful idea. He said he'd like to propose building a tunnel under Mont Blanc at a meeting of the ECE Transport Committee. He told me all about it, I was incredulous at first, not being an engineer, but he told me why this was perfectly feasible and would only cost a few billion dollars. Therefore, could he propose it? I said, "Absolutely not. That's a wonderful idea, but you get the Europeans to do it. The first thing that's going to happen if you propose it, is that they're going to believe that this is something the U.S. is ready to finance, and I am telling you it isn't ready to finance." In the end it got built, with European funds, and this

gentleman can rest happy that he was one of the first to see this possibility. I have to live with the fact that I never let this come up in the way it was first proposed.

Q: Did you find that the U.S., Great Britain and France were pretty well together with what you were doing? Or was France beginning to get off the range a bit?
ASHER: No, I think in the early part the French were fine. Their first representative to the Economic Commission was André Philippe, who was a socialist. The British had socialist members in their delegation. We had ex-New Dealers in the American resident group. We all got along very well. And the Dutch were very helpful. They were a small country. And Norway and Denmark too, couldn't be accused of trying to dominate anything and they tried to provide good personnel and used them to work constructively. It was interesting.

Q: You did that until when in Geneva?

ASHER: What Harriman wanted was for us to come to Paris for the periodic meetings of his country Marshall Plan directors. Paul Porter and I both went to all Marshall Plan chiefs' meetings. We reported on what was going on in Geneva and we got the benefit of 16 very encouraging reports on what was going on in each Marshall Plan country. To the extent that we could absorb and understand it, it became part of our expertise in Geneva. Harriman himself came to the full annual meeting of the Economic Commission for Europe. He didn't like Geneva particularly, he couldn't wait to get out of it usually, but he did come. He gave us stature, so to speak, in Geneva. In 1950 I came home to work in the European Regional Affairs Division in the State Department.

Q: How did you find in this '47-'50 period in Switzerland, how did you find both Switzerland and the Swiss?

ASHER: Well, Switzerland was absolute heaven after London. It was undamaged, it was a well-run little country, its food was absolutely delicious -- London at its best was not then known for its cuisine --and the Swiss had spectacular scenery. Wonderful little inns and hotels all over. Wonderful transport system. One Sunday when we were going skating at one of those mountain resorts near Geneva, I accidentally left my billfold on the ticket-counter at the railroad station in Geneva. I was naturally terribly worried, we were already on the train. When I came back in the evening I rushed back to this window and asked whether anyone had heard of a billfold that had been left there, and I described it. The ticket-seller said, "Yes, of course. We have it." I said, "Thank you so much, to whom do I owe my thanks for this?" And he said, "Why shouldn't you have it? It's yours." He couldn't understand. It was an honest country. This couldn't happen in Italy at that time, or France.

Q: How did you find the Swiss as hosts for the organization?

ASHER: They were stand-offish. They had had the League of Nations and they were pleased to have the successor organization. But they were neutral themselves, proud of their neutrality, and not members of the UN. We tried to start, with some success, a

Swiss-American Society or something like that. But the Swiss members tended to be those who had an American wife, a brother in the U.S., or some other relative. We had some social meetings. Our landlords, of course, the property owners, were Swiss, willing to make more than a buck out of the influx of foreigners. So, it was mixed. I don't think we really made many close Swiss friends. I had from Lend-Lease days in North Africa, an expatriate Swiss friend who had been at the university in the U.S. and stayed there. Although you never lose your Swiss citizenship, you know. He had told me he had a sister living in Geneva and she and her husband were prominent there. Of course I looked them up and out of obligation to their brother they had us over for a great dinner and treated us very nicely, but it was clear that they had their social circle and they were not about to bring us into it. And I must say, we weren't all that fluent in French. It wasn't surprising to me that they went their own way.

Shopkeepers were a different category, they were of course delighted to have people with purchasing power coming in and out. I took many people to watch companies in Switzerland and those companies were glad to sell watches but very secretive about their production processes. In the end, it cost them their watch business because Timex and people like that made watches that cost 15 or 20 dollars and kept better time than 150, 200 and 400-dollar Swiss watches. But buying a Swiss watch was the aim of every visitor who came to Switzerland between 1947 and 1950.

Q: In 1950, you came back to Washington and you were a part of the State Department?

ASHER: Yes. European Bureau. We had one unit called European Regional Affairs. It was headed by Ed Martin and Doug MacArthur II. They were concerned with the Marshall Plan, NATO, the Economic Commission for Europe and general regional affairs. It was an interesting business to get back into Washington.

Q: And the Cold War was there?

ASHER: It was very much there.

Q: Czechoslovakia, and Berlin airlift and all.

ASHER: Well, the Berlin air-lift and the Czechoslovakian crisis were going on while I was still in Europe.

Q: What I was saying, these already set the stage.

ASHER: Yes. Divided Europe.

Q: What were your concerns in this Bureau?

ASHER: They were concerned, inter alia, with keeping track of the general progress of the European economy. The Marshall Plan as you know was administered by a separate organization. As Europe grew richer, we were beginning to plan for some of the so-called

"less developed countries," then just coming out of the colonial status. I went to the first meeting, I guess I was appointed, I don't know who arranged the delegation, but I went from our part of the State Department and the Economic Affairs Department to the first meeting of the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East and the Economic Commission for Latin America. Another job within Regional Affairs was to be sort of liaison with the UN Bureau of State insofar as Europe was concerned. The UN Bureau was headed by Francis Wilcox and then by Dean Rusk who later became Secretary of State.

Q: Rusk?

ASHER: Rusk! When was he Secretary?

Q: '61-'60-something.

ASHER: Yes, I was out of State by then. But he had been head of UN Affairs. A very solid guy, who had come from the Rockefeller Foundation, I think. Impressive. Later I came to disagree with him substantially on Vietnam, he was the greatest, last-ditch defender of the U.S. position on Vietnam. But the Regional Affairs section of the European Bureau, I think, was effective and respected. It had some very able people while some of the other European units had people who were still trying to find their role in the postwar world. Ed Martin, Doug MacArthur, Miriam Camps, Ruth Phillips, Lou Boochever and others constituted a very good group. Young people for the most part, energetic, and they got involved in all sorts of problems that strictly speaking may not have been European regional affairs.

Another problem was that NATO was being established. North Atlantic Treaty affairs were a regional problem and Doug MacArthur was our expert on that.

Q: Were you, one of the great accomplishments of American foreign policy was the sponsoring and pushing of what eventually became the European Union. Jean Monnet and the Coal/Steel Community which grew into the European Community which grew into the common market and all that. Was that…?

ASHER: Yes. That was incubating in that period. It was a very exciting part of it and it was a divisive part. Because the "one-worlders" in the UN part of the State Department and the old-time nationalists in other parts of the State Department were very concerned about this establishment of supra-national ties within Western Europe.

Q: Building up a rival to the U.S.

ASHER: Yes and to the UN. Jean Monnet was, as you know, a brilliant spokesman, very effective and well-connected throughout the U.S. and Europe. It was his vision, his drive that was largely responsible for the early progress of European integration. NATO brought European governments together, too.

Q: Where did you fit in personally in this spectrum of "nationalist" – "one-worlder?"

ASHER: I was a one-worlder until the Russians disillusioned me. And very much so. I was an enthusiastic supporter of the global organizations, but I became persuaded that building smaller blocks was in certain respects a better way to approach integration than to try and do it all at once, when we were obviously living in a divided world. It was further divided between the developing countries and the so-called developed ones. That too became, as you know, the source of a lot of tension in international agencies. I became a willing, eager convert to European integration first, and globalization as a longer term visionary thing which we could work at but which wouldn't come into being for a lot of years. It was reasonably clear, once we got the issue of Germany more or less settled, that European cooperation could proceed rapidly. Monnet, of course, saw immediately that integration of the German economy was essential to the rebirth of Europe and the ending of Franco-German wars. I was glad to work on the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development] which grew out of the Marshall Plan and is still functioning today. As for the Western European Army versus NATO, I was more protective of NATO and I didn't see much opportunity for another international army within that NATO framework.

Q: You were with these European Affairs 1950-what?

ASHER: I was formally in the European Regional Affairs shop for only about a year. Then I became a special assistant to Willard Thorp, the Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs. He already had one very competent special assistant, Bob Schaetzel. We became good friends. I worked for Willard Thorp and his successors until 1954, when I left the State Department for Brookings.

Q: Can you talk about leaving?

ASHER: Yes. Our Economic Affairs area was very active until Secretary Dulles came in.

Q: 1953, Eisenhower administration.

ASHER: Yes. I was a great admirer of Dean Acheson. He was a tough, clear-seeing, articulate State Department spokesman. I had been in Paris with the first U.S. delegation to the UN General Assembly in the fall of 1948, when Mr. Dulles was a part of the delegation. He was absolutely confident that the '48 election would bring in a Republican president, namely Dewey, and that he would really become head of the delegation. There was an embarrassing period when he was just there and Acheson remained Secretary of State and Truman was elected President.
But after Eisenhower's election in 1952, Dulles became Secretary and brought with him his passion for security pacts with every "free" country in the world as an anti-communist measure. I couldn't see this. Partly because of my broad international outlook, and partly because it seemed too much like an elephant and a rabbit being harnessed together. A U.S. security and mutual defense treaty with Ecuador or a small weak country elsewhere just didn't seem to me a very realistic thing. Dulles talked to departmental employees about

"positive loyalty" and getting behind him. I think he rightly had reason to expect that State Department employees would fall in cheerfully with his views. I felt that if I didn't, it was not a good idea to stick around and, if I could go elsewhere, I would be happier and so would the State Department.

Brookings had just committed itself to a big five-volume series of books on the United States and the United Nations. They were doing a fat volume on the UN and economic and social cooperation. They called it "The United Nations and Promotion of the General Welfare." They offered me a temporary job, a contract, to produce a couple of chapters for that. That gave me a bridge at least to get out of the State Department and still have something to do.

My old boss Willard Thorp, who had been the Assistant Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, was administering a large grant from the Merrill Foundation. Charles Merrill of Merrill Lynch had given a lot of money to Amherst College and along with it, Mr. Merrill had given a base on Long Island, a wonderful summer home, which was to become the Merrill Center for Economics with Willard L. Thorp as Director. Willard invited me to the first and second summers there, in 1954 and '55, to be a kind of secretary for the distinguished rotating group of economists who were invited to come there and discuss inflation and other world economic problems. They ate well and they talked well and none of the problems were solved, but considerable light was shed on them. And I was provided with a nice place to live and work and learn.

Q: Did McCarthyism hit you at all?

ASHER: Yes. Tangentially and via friends, who were targeted much more openly than I was. I was served an interrogatory, I think that was the first stage. I had to put down all the organizations I ever belonged to, what I did in them and so on. The charge of associating with communists was based on my wife's brief membership in the Washington Bookshop. She had taken some graduate courses in labor economics at American University, and she bought where the books were cheapest. What was very fortunate was that we were both sensitive to the communist issue from our Chicago experience with the Workers Committee on Unemployment. My wife discovered very quickly that the Washington Bookshop was sort of a communist front, that they pushed the books that were written by fellow travelers. She had written them a letter saying, "I want to resign from the bookshop, I am not in sympathy with the way things are going. Please take me off your mailing list, cut me off." She had saved her pencil draft of this letter, which I was able to produce and show that we were on to it and that we were very sophisticated about fellow traveling organizations. Also I had been involved in the pre-war period in some anti-communist, liberal organizations, including a forerunner of Americans for Democratic Action, the Union for Democratic Action. Ethel and I were involved in the Washington office of it. One of the objectives was to get clear of some of the communist baggage that was involved in the early New Deal period. Anyhow, I went through a few weeks of extreme discomfort, but I was cleared. I guess I could have stayed with the State Department.

Q: Did it help to sort of sour and encourage…?

ASHER: Yes. It did not help my feelings and the Secretary of State was talking about positive loyalty. Our new Secretary for Economic Affairs, Sam Waugh, who was a Nebraska banker, was a very innocent person and a very nice person. I had been a special assistant to Willard Thorp, so Mr. Waugh sort of inherited me and Bob Schaetzel. I went in the first day he was on duty and said, "Have you been sworn in yet?" He said, "No. What do I have to do? Get a notary public?" I said, "No, there's usually a ceremony in the secretary's office or assistant secretary's. Let me see what I can arrange." He said, "Can I look at State Department papers until then?" "Not classified papers, but you are here and I'd be happy to talk to you and everyone else will, too."

I called Dulles' office and they were very decent and we set up a time for the swearing-in in a few days. I told Mr. Waugh, "This is a good chance to send your wife a corsage and to invite your friends." My God, he invited everybody from Nebraska, it became embarrassing. I'd been to several of these things under Acheson and he was always very gracious, even though he may inwardly have resented the time and energy spent on these ceremonial occasions. With Mr. Waugh, his wife, his friends and some staff, we assembled in a large room adjoining the Secretary's office. Mr. Waugh had asked me just what would happen there, I had said, "Well, the Secretary will make a gracious speech about good it is to have you on board and how important the economic affairs job is, and so on." I didn't realize then that Dulles didn't give a damn about economic problems. And you will have to say, how pleasant it is to be aboard, how much you look forward to working with him on important economic problems, etc." He said, "Will you write it down for me?" I then gave him a page and a half, mostly generalities.

He had this in his pocket on yellow paper when he went up to the secretary's office for the swearing in. His wife came along and all these Nebraskans were there. After we'd been waiting long enough to get little impatient, Secretary Dulles came out of his office with Mr. Simmons, who was then the Director of Protocol. Dulles said to Mr. Simmons, quite audibly, as they were coming out of his office, "What are we here for now?" And Simmons said, a bit less audibly, "Swearing in of Sam Waugh." "Oh that!", said Mr. Dulles. After the oath of office had been administered by the Chief of Protocol, Secretary Dulles said, "We're glad to have you on board." Long pause. "You'll be here as Assistant Secretary for Economic Affairs and there's plenty of work to do." Period. End. Mr. Waugh looked at me and reached for his speech and I shook my head. He got the idea and simply said, "I am very glad to be aboard, Mr. Secretary. I am hoping to work with you and the other people here." It was a disaster. It was a flop. That was early in my experience of Mr. Dulles. I really sort of held that against him as a singularly ungracious welcome for a man who was eager to work, who didn't know the Washington routines, and who deserved a warm public welcome. But then I really felt more badly about Dulles's demand for what he called "positive loyalty."

Q: He did that when he first…

ASHER: His first speech to us.

Q: "Positive loyalty." That rings to… everybody who lived through Dulles era remembers "positive loyalty." Not in a positive sense.

ASHER: That's right.

Q: Because it sounded like you wanted everybody to tow the line and to be dutiful little soldiers. And organization is supposed to give advice.

ASHER: That's right. That's exactly right. It was particularly humiliating in economic affairs, because Dulles simply did not think our work was very important. We had perhaps grown complacent, maybe arrogant even, thinking that doing something about the economic situation in Europe particularly, but also in the less developed countries was virtually the number one job for the U.S.

Q: You were at Brookings for how long?

ASHER: Nineteen years.
Q: In a way, this moves beyond, but I'd like to catch a bit. How did you see, during these 19 years, '54 to '73, what was the role of one of these think-tanks, such as Brookings, what were you doing in it, as regards to foreign policy mainly?

ASHER: I had several leaves of absence for international agency assignments. Did at least a six months job for the Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome, when they were trying to put together a regional, largely agricultural, development scheme for the entire Mediterranean region. And having been in North Africa before, they put me in charge of the Morocco-Tunisia team, to design a program for the agricultural development of those two countries, in concert with other Mediterranean country teams. Because one of the dangers foreseen by FAO was that Spain, Portugal, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, everybody, would say, "We can export oranges or olives or both. We can grow them, we can export them." But you can only produce a certain number without flooding the market. If Spain could market in late spring and Morocco in early spring, that would be reasonable. But, it's not reasonable to have all the countries moving into the same agricultural commodity for export at the same time.

I had that leave of absence. I had two or three other shorter leaves to do other special jobs. I went back to State to serve for a couple of weeks on a UN committee.

Brookings was a research organization. It took us quite a while to get out our UN series. Ruth Russell's volume on the UN Charter may be the most enduring part of the multi-volume series. We worked very closely with people who had either recently been in the State Department or had been professors of international relations in universities. We had a Foreign Policy Studies group in Brookings, and an Economic Studies group. They overlapped. Basically, Economic Studies was thought of as concentrating on our domestic economy. And we also had a political science group, which was called Governmental Studies. Brookings at that time was the only think-tank in Washington that

I know of, other than the National Planning Association. It was relatively small. It had an endowment. It was founded by Robert Brookings, who was a St. Louis businessman who came to Washington during the First World War and was appalled to discover how little the government knew about the economic affairs of the country and vice-versa, how little the industrialists knew about government. He dedicated a large part of his fortune, and his personal interest, too, to the establishment of an institution that would do more to make the public aware of the problems of our government.

Q: Did it have a cast of as being sort of the democratic one, or was it…?

ASHER: No.

Q: Now it sort of seems to be considered as heritage of the foundation, a bit on the liberal side.

ASHER: Yes. At the time that I first went there it had a cast of people who were not involved in the New Deal at all and were in fact opposed to a lot of it. But with the shrinking of the New Deal economic and social agencies, and the broad shake-down of government after World War II, Brookings did get a lot of former New Dealers. Another thing is that the people who came from the government, unlike the academics who had been at Brookings before, were activists. They wanted Brookings to produce something that would have some effect. Originally, Moulton and Ed Nourse, the first chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors, thought of Brookings as just a study group. They produced two monumental works, certainly, in the early days of Brookings, long before I came there, namely, "America's Capacity to Produce" and "America's Capacity to Consume." Two studies that were very important and influential.

Q: In a way some of these think-tanks have served to be, maybe it's not the best term, but half-way houses between people who were leaving government, but waiting to get back in. I am sure right now, we are talking about the end of November 2000, we don't even know who is going to be our president yet, but the think-tanks all over town here, you got people who are wearing a dark suit and a conservative tie every day to work just in a case they might get the call.

ASHER: You are absolutely right. When the Kennedy administration came in, in 1961, it was to some extent the beneficiary of this half-way house notion. Brookings and others had sheltered a number of people during the Eisenhower years and released them back to the Kennedy administration. But the think-tanks also have a function of their own, I am convinced, that's worth doing. To some extent I think the labels liberal and conservative are unfortunate, although probably unavoidable. We tried hard and I thought succeeded to a considerable extent to tackle a problem, see how it shapes up, give all the facts and arguments against whatever solution would be proposed and, of course, those in favor of it, so that the reader who doesn't come to the same conclusion as the writer has at least the facts on which he can base a different conclusion. I thought that was a fair way of doing things. But it's hard to state the rationale for something one doesn't believe in as cogently and as persuasively as the rationale for the side one does believe in.

Q: The Brookings institution faced both ways, one towards the political and the other towards the academic, or was it more towards the political?

ASHER: I think it is both ways. Some of our finest people were still associated with universities, on leave or sabbatical, or even people like Charlie Schultz or Art Okun. Art, who had taught at Yale, started Brookings as a full time member of the senior staff, but Charlie kept on teaching at the University of Maryland. Certainly many of them come from universities and in some cases go back to universities. I came without academic ties.

Q: So it really is a genus type-thing.

ASHER: That's exactly the right word. We, at least I, felt should be careful about making our people too accessible to government. Otherwise government would think of us as a holding company, to produce personnel for them needed.

Q: You were there until into the '70s, is that right?

ASHER: Until '73.

Q: You mentioned Kennedy administration, how they used it. What about the Nixon administration? Were you still a player, were you sort of ignored, or how? I mean you as the Institution.

ASHER: Nixon wanted our files rifled. At the time of Watergate, one of the places that he wanted to get the records of was the Brooking Institution. We had a few people who actually went into or came from the Nixon administration, but it was a much cooler relationship than under even his predecessor Eisenhower, because Eisenhower was not a politically partisan person at all. Another tension at Brookings was between long-term studies and short-term things. Should you try to influence next week's or next year's policy decision on something, or is the bigger problem to understand the whole American tax system and to design something that will be more equitable, more manageable, and a better tax system. When I first came to Brookings it was producing fat books. They were not popular in academic circles, but they were basic reading matter, particularly for faculty members, who then could regurgitate them in more palatable doses to their students. But the pressure was to be relevant, in order to raise money, which Brookings had to do, too, for its studies and you couldn't do that as easily for a long-term project as you could on matters that would be next year's problems.

I ask myself now, when I go back for retirees meetings and dinners and so on, and I am on their e-mail list, a troublesome question: Brookings has somebody ready to pronounce a view on television almost every day of the week. We get email notices of this, and invited to participate in a conference call at 12 o'clock, and I worry about whether the Brookings experts are getting sort of myopic and too busy with the short-term stuff.

Q: I guess the wish food of messing with present day policy is too tempting.

ASHER: It's too tempting. And it is true, initially the endowment plus Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation funds enabled us to do those three-year studies. But that kind of money has dried up, so what are you going to do?

Q: Then you sort of retired in '74? You've been doing all sorts of things since then.

ASHER: Yes, just about as busy ever since until quite recently. After producing with Ed Mason of Harvard a big book on the World Bank called " The World Bank Since Bretton Woods," which was one of those longer-term projects, trying to put into perspective the work of the World Bank, I retired from Brookings. One of the first things that came along was that the World Bank was interested in starting an Oral History Program and I helped launch that. I did a half a dozen interviews, got paid for that.

Q: Zechler or something?

ASHER: Yes, begins with a Z.

Q: I remember meeting him 15 years ago, seeking his advice on how to do these things.

ASHER: Zlatech or something like that. He is a very nice fellow.

Q: A very nice guy.

ASHER: Yes, he gave me a chance to go right back to the Bank where I'd been hanging out for three years, with an Oral History Program.

Then a totally different kind of thing came along. The University I think it was of Southern California, wanted to establish a public administration degree-granting branch in the District of Columbia. And the organized academic community of the District, by which I mean George Washington University, Howard, the University of Maryland and so forth, was not eager to have another degree-granting institution available locally. Somehow, I don't know how, the District of Columbia decided to establish a committee to advise them on this question. They got somebody from the University of Maryland, somebody from George Washington University and from Howard U. and then they thought, "Maybe we should turn to Brookings for an objective chairman." So I got tagged for that. It was a very short job. The chief problems were: does the new institution have an adequate library, is it a well-rounded institution, and so on. We were pretty uneasy, it really wasn't an institution that should be granting M.A.s and Ph.D.s. But they provided that it would really be just a way-station of the University of Southern California. And the people would really get their degrees there and they would come here for such work as involved them in the national capital. We compromised on letting them give master's degrees, waiting till later to rule on Ph.D.s. It was a job for which I had no particular competence, except I had been around universities and I knew enough to work closely with my fellow committee members.

Also, Brookings hired me right away as a consultant for a wonderful job. I was to go around and look at schools of public policy. They were a relatively new phenomenon in the early '70s, and I was asked to find out: a) what they were doing, and b) whether there were ways in which Brookings and they could work in harmony on joint projects. I got to see Michigan, Stanford, Berkeley and other fine institutions. It was a great trip. Also very interesting, because there were established schools of public administration which had basically just changed their names to public policy and introduced one course called Policy Making or something like that. There were places that capitalized on the fashion for schools of public policy and really had two people from their political science department established as a center, trying to get money separately for that. All of them were eager to get from Brookings a Joe Pechman, who was the country's best expert on tax policy I guess, and Arthur Okun, who was a highly respected economist and ex-Chairman of the Council of the Economic Advisors. In exchange, they would offer from their faculty what I described in my report as a promising young shortstop and a utility outfielder. But the main thing that killed my report, because I thought that there were quite a few possibilities for collaboration, was the feeling of the directors of foreign policy and governmental studies and economic studies that "We can get Ph.D.s who are qualified and experts in our fields, why should we fiddle around with somebody the University of You-name-it can release for a little while," and so on. We did develop one or two projects in which work could basically be farmed out to some university. Or we could take a young student and be a host to him while he worked on his Ph.D. on a subject of interest also to Brookings. He would, of course, acquire access to our foreign policy experts, or tax experts, or anti-trust personnel. But, basically, I got six or eight weeks paid vacation going around to these places, coming back and writing a report, on which the Brookings trustees complimented me. Nothing happened that I know of. Since then I continued till recently to pick up paying jobs of a short-term nature.

To summarize, I've had 20 wonderful years working for the US Government – about 10 in domestic service and 10 in foreign service; 19 years with a great research institution, Brookings; and 13 or 14 years as a free-lance consultant. I've enjoyed almost every minute of my working life. Government service can be frustrating, but it can also be very exciting and satisfying. At the moment, it may not have much appeal for bright young graduates but I urge them to consider it seriously.

End of interview