

Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

WILLIAM J. GEHRON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is the 24th of August 2000. This is an interview with William J. Gehron. This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Well, let's start at the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born and something about your family.

GEHRON: I was born in New York City on August 5, 1924. I actually resided in my youth in Pelham, New York, which is a suburb just outside of New York City. I was born into what I can describe as a middle class family. My father was an architect; my mother for all of her life was a housewife; and I had a sister. That [was] the immediate family.

Q: Give me a little bit about the background of your father.

GEHRON: He was a man who was brought up in a very large family. I think there were something like 14 children in the family and they were people who came out of Williamsburg, Pennsylvania. His father owned a lumber mill there. My father tells a story of having been on the job one day, up on the roof doing some roofing work, and he looked down and saw a man in a coat and tie and said to one of his colleagues, "Who is that fella?"

His colleague said, "That guy is an architect."

And my father said, "Well, that's what I'm gonna be! If you can stand down there in a coat and tie, that look's pretty good!" So he was the only son out of the 14 children who ended up in New York City, where he did become an architect.

Q: What was the background of the family? Was the "Gehron" German, Irish, or what?

GEHRON: It's German essentially. We always make fun of the name. It's Alsatian. We used to say that when the French were there, we would pronounce it "jeh-ron," and when the Germans were there we would say, "Geh-ron." It actually is a German name.

Q: Where did your father go to architectural school?

GEHRON: He went to what is now Carnegie Mellon, but then was Carnegie Tech in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He ended up in his own firm in New York City, Gehron and Seltzer, and did, I would say, very, very well for somebody who was essentially on his own. He did have a partner here and there. He designed some buildings at West Point. He did the Harrisburg State Capitol group and a number of buildings at Denison University in Ohio. So he did some fairly interesting and monumental buildings, including a monument to sailors which stands in Battery Park in New York City.

Q: What about your mother's family background?

GEHRON: She came out of an Irish family, New York City oriented. Unlike my father's family which held together pretty well, it was a broken family. Her father left the family, and she was brought up largely by her mother. They were a rather religious Catholic family doing what I guess anybody in New York City does. She went to the usual schools, I guess Catholic schools, and then at a very young age married my father. I was very enthralled by her. (Laughing)

Q: Let's talk about the sort of family life you had. Did one sit around the dining room table and talk about things, or was each busy going his own way? I was just wondering, you know.

GEHRON: I would say it was a rather talkative family. We did sit around the table doing a good deal of talking. That's a characteristic that's been carried on into my own family, I must say. We tend to take over the conversation wherever we go. That may be a good thing or a bad thing; I don't know which. It just depends on what the surroundings are. It was a family where my mother was a good reader, my father not so good, but he was interested in philosophical things beyond his architecture. My mother was quite a reader.

My sister was a very bright young woman. She went to Dana Hall and Wellesley College, and eventually she ended up with rheumatic heart and had to go to Rollins College. She was offered a scholarship there in English, but she felt that she wanted to get out of that atmosphere at Rollins. She wanted to go to work, so she went to work for IBM. All of this time my mother was, as I say, a housewife, and my father was pretty well tied to his business in architecture.

Q: Where did you go to elementary school?

GEHRON: I went through the normal school system in Pelham, New York and that meant Colonial Elementary School, and then I went to the Pelham High School. But I wasn't doing very well in school. I didn't take it too seriously. I guess there are an awful lot of young people who operate on that basis, more fun than work. My father showed some concern about this--my mother as well. So the last two years of my schooling in high school, I spent at a preparatory school in Windsor, Connecticut, called Loomis.

Q: Yes?

GEHRON: That was really an experience for me, because it was the first time I really began to understand the value of an education and really started to knuckle down and do some reasonably good work. I liked the campus lifestyle.

Q: Oh, did you?

GEHRON: Very much so. It was a regimented life - study, work. I had a scholarship and was the school mailman. Much different than high school.

Q: Let's go back before to where you went to public schools. What were your interests?

GEHRON: Well, as I say, I wasn't much of a student. I can't recall off the top of my head anything on the intellectual side that particularly interested me. I was sports oriented. Even though I was small of stature, I did go out for track and I think I did pretty well in that. I won a letter, I believe. I did the sprints. I also went out for intermediate basketball or whatever it's called. I was much too small to do much there, but we had a high school team that went around and played other schools at that level. I played baseball. I was not into football. That was about the extent of it.

Q: What about just reading for fun?

GEHRON: I did a lot of that; I tended to follow my mother's example. The reading I did when I was young was probably more down the line of the Hornblower type novel than more serious reading.

Q: C.S. Forester.

GEHRON: Yes, right, right.

Q: But actually, along with the books of that era, were historical novels. You got quite a bit of it. Kenneth Roberts, and that genre. That's what people were reading.

GEHRON: Yes, they were and we had some of the classics in the house. I remember things like that as well. I didn't really get into something on a much broader scale until college when I was introduced to all kinds of things.

Q: Well then, could you describe Loomis? You were there from when? This would be about what?

GEHRON: This was about 1940. This was just before the United States went into World War II. In fact, we did do some elementary military training during the time I was there and that had an effect on the campus. Actually, when the U.S. entered the war, the student body asked the headmaster if they couldn't establish some kind of a cadet corp. Bachelor, who was the headmaster at that time, a wise old man, let the students do that. The seniors were permitted to form a cadet corps and actually train under the auspices of

the Hartford National Guard.

Some of us even went to the extent of taking flying lessons in preparation for going into the Air Force. I was one of those. I got very close to soloing when I had to leave school. I kept that interest up and later spent some time in the Air Corps.

But beyond that, Loomis was a very good school for disciplining the mind and the body, really. When I say the body, I don't mean it in quite the usual way. You had to wait on tables; that was a requirement. You had to make your own bed, you had to sweep out your room, and you had, as I mentioned, order and discipline. It was up to the students to do the policing. I think that was a very, very good thing.

Beyond that, it was a very stimulating place intellectually for me and much more so than high school. High school was a mishmash that I never really got my hands on. Loomis was a place where I felt I was beginning to zero in on some interests, such as history, English, and other things. I found it a very, very rewarding experience.

Q: You were there from '40 to '42; what about World War II? How did that change your reading habits, outlook, and all?

GEHRON: Well, you know, it's really rather interesting. I seem like a very naive, uninterested individual. But looking back on that period, I can certainly remember when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. I was home at the time. It shocked me, of course, as it shocked everyone. I didn't know what the effect of that would be. I was in school at the time, one of the years I was at Loomis. I wasn't at all aware of how drastically that was going to affect my life. I think it began to dawn on me just how serious this was when we formed this cadet unit. I don't remember reading an awful lot about what was going on in Europe at the time. I probably did, but looking back and just off the top of my head, I can't recall. We were obviously interested in current events and what was going on in the world, but life at school took precedence.

Q: For a lot of people in this era, they picked up a pretty good course in geography by knowing where Guadalcanal was or Benghazi, the Gold Coast, or what have you.

GEHRON: Yes, that's true. Again, it's rather interesting. I later, at the request of my children, wrote down a family history, and I remember writing that, even when I was fighting in Europe in World War II, I was not very aware of what was going on in the Pacific area. I don't know why I was rather closed minded about that, but certainly I was aware of what was going on in Europe. I was very aware of that. But the Pacific seemed to be another world; still is to a certain extent. To this day, I never have visited that area of the world.

Q: I take it while you were at Loomis, you and your colleagues were preparing to go into military service.

GEHRON: Yes, that's right. We thought we would go on to military service. I should

relate one interesting thing though at Loomis, which really left a mark on me as a young person growing up. In my first year I got into some trouble. I was not all that good as a student or that attentive. My father used to have to see the headmaster once in a while about my conduct. I remember it was maybe the third occasion, and the headmaster asked my mother and father to come up to the school. I thought that meant that I was on my way out. I've forgotten what the incident was. It wasn't a nasty thing; I can recall that. It was something that I did to the dislike of the headmaster and perhaps some other teachers. Anyway, he called me in with my father and mother there. He went on to say, "You know, I think that this young man has got some talent, and I'm not going to have him dismissed from school. I feel that he can make it here if he will really try to do the job." I sensed that here was an older man instilling in me, a young man, a lot of confidence about myself. The next year I went on to be a counselor and on the student board that ran the school. I really tried to apply myself. I put that to a large extent to the headmaster, who by his confidence that I'd do the job, in turn, built confidence in me.

Q: Oh, absolutely! Well then, you graduated, what? Did you graduate?

GEHRON: In June of '43.

Q: And, of course, that was right in the middle of the war.

GEHRON: That's right. There's an interesting story there. I graduated in June 1943 and looking around, did not know what I wanted to do. I had applied to go to Williams College and I had been accepted there. I thought about some kind of a summer job. One day I came home after looking around in the local town for some kind of a job, and my mother told me that there was a letter from the President of the United States. I said, "Oh, that's interesting." And sure enough, I had been drafted. I'd wanted to enlist in 1941, but my mother and father said, "No." Remember I was 17 or whatever it was where you needed parental permission. They said no, I should finish my schooling at Loomis, and they were very wise in that. So I was called up in the draft in June of '43.

Q: Where'd you go? Let's talk about your military service.

GEHRON: Well, when I first started, I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for my initial training. Then I went on to Fort Bliss, Texas where I ended up in the armored cars with an antiaircraft unit, and that was pretty rough, a pretty hot place.

Q: Half-tracks.

GEHRON: Half-tracks. That's exactly what they were. The regiment was very strict there. They'd give you one canteen of water for the day and one shower every three or four days. It was pretty rough, man. We were out in the field an awful lot. I think the unit was probably billed to go overseas very shortly and that's why they were being so tough. I think the desert training was for the action that was going on in North Africa. As it turned out, I left that unit.

I was interested in the Air Corps. At that time, it was the U.S. Army Air Corps. It wasn't until 1947, I think, that it became a separate service. So I applied and I was accepted. I went to air cadet school. That was at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. It was wonderful, because the local men for the most part had gone either into the civilian service during the war or military service, and that left a bevy of southern belles (laughing). A uniform is pretty good looking when you have it on. No matter what you look like, the uniform was looking good. We looked pretty attractive, I think, walking around that campus. At least we felt we did. I took some courses there; I can't remember what they were. I do remember that I ended up being nominated for, rather than a pilot's position, that of a bombardier. That was something of a disappointment. I had or have pretty good eyes, and I attribute that to the fact that I went the bombardier way, rather than the pilot's way. That unfortunately ended when preparations began for the invasion of Europe. I think what happened there was that the military could foresee a need for a lot of troops, support and otherwise, for the invasion. The air cadets were something they could easily do away with and did so. So that rather idyllic period of my military career ended abruptly.

I found myself sent off to Biloxi, Mississippi. I don't remember exactly what we did there. It was an air force posting. Then I ended up with the ordnance at a place called Redstone Ordnance in Texarkana, Texas. There I started moving around high explosive bombs in these large igloos, unloading and loading them, on the trucks and off the trucks. I just concluded that wasn't the kind of thing I wanted to do. I took the occasion to apply to the Officer Candidate School (OCS) at Fort Benning, Georgia. Very shortly thereafter, the notice came that I was accepted, so I left the Ordnance Corps and went to Fort Benning. But I must just tell you that it was rather interesting for me because when I was being interviewed to go to the Officer Candidate School, I was before a board of Redstone Arsenal Ordnance officers. I've forgotten the rank, but maybe up to a lieutenant colonel. I was then a corporal or something. I was fairly young at that stage; I guess I was about 19 or 18. They were asking me what service I wanted to go into and why.

I, in kind of a red, white, and blue way said, "I'm going to get right into the thick of it. I want the infantry!"

They very nicely said, "Well, look, you're in the ordnance corps. Why don't you go to Ordnance OCS?"

I just couldn't accept that. I just felt that I had to get into the middle of this thing, some way or other, young blood, and not a lot of wisdom perhaps. So off I went to Fort Benning and the Infantry Officers Candidate School.

Q: I might, for the record, point out that I think at the time you were an air cadet, there were special training groups, specialists and all that. They cut a lot of this out because they realized that to keep the equivalent of about 80 divisions going in the army, they really were beginning to run out of people. They didn't have time for some of these other things, which were rather long term.

GEHRON: Yes, that's right. The air cadet program was pretty long. You were in there for quite a period of time, both at the university and then your experience beyond that. So it was a rather lengthy program.

Q: How did you find OCS?

GEHRON: Even as a young man and rather physically fit, I found it very tough. Again, I don't remember all the courses. There was night this, night that, compass this, compass that, geography this, geography that, map reading, all these kinds of things, plus hiking and doing all of the shooting and the climbing over walls, and the running, and goodness knows what. I remember bayonet training. I don't know why we went through that, because we ended up at the end of the OCS period as officers with carbines.

Q: Oh, my gosh! We're not equipped to carry a bayonet. (Laughter)

GEHRON: Might have been a throw back to the Civil War. I don't know. But in any event, it was rugged training. There were a number of people who were older than I was who were in the program. It was really tough on them. They were in from civilian life and they hadn't done something like this for quite a while. But most of us made it through. We were "90-day-wonders," that's what we were called, and that's what we were in for, 90 days. I think they did a pretty darn good job, all things considered.

Q: We'd had people who'd been fighting now for a couple of years. Our army had been at war, in real war, for a long time. Was there much effort to have people equivalent to a sergeant or something tell you how it really was and that type of thing, or was it pretty much by the book?

GEHRON: I would say from my memory of it now, it was pretty much by the book, but I do remember that there were some people who had been in combat and had come back. I recall one fellow who had malaria, who had bouts of it there. He was an instructor. So we did have people giving us training who had seen combat and had come back, but I don't remember anybody really laying out for me the depth of what I was maybe going to confront. I still kind of carried around this romantic idealized vision of what war was all about.

Q: All right, what happened? I mean, you graduated from OCS as a second lieutenant?

GEHRON: Yes, I graduated from OCS, and I think I was probably on orders at the time I graduated. They needed people immediately. I graduated and I guess it was February of '45 by this time. Maybe it was a little earlier than that. I went home on home leave. That was one of the few times I had home leave. I remember going to my parent's house in my spanking new uniform with my gold bars. They were very proud, but I think they were also very concerned, because they didn't know what the future held, nor did I; but they probably had a better idea than I did. I remember telling them that I had orders to report to New York City within 10 days, so I guess that added even more concern. As it turned out, I really have a rather vivid memory of that. I wanted to make it as easy as possible on

them. When the time came to leave, I asked them if they would not walk with me to the Pelham Railroad Station, which was close to home. I asked them not to walk me up to the station. I preferred to walk up that morning to catch the train to New York alone and to say my goodbyes the night before. They were very good about that and that's what happened. I left them without seeing them in the morning and I got out very early. I remember the night before my father gave me a Saint Christopher medal. He is the patron saint of travelers, keeping them well and away from harm. You know, to this day I still carry that thing around in my wallet with the same threading on the same piece of leather that my father sewed it to back then.

I walked to the Pelham Station and met a student that I'd gone to school with. Indeed, he'd been on the track team with me. We were both going to the same place, and off we went. We went on down to the docks of New York City. I came on to the docks and there were lots and lots of soldiers milling around, and the Red Cross was there, and women handing out coffee, and so on. There was a great big ship there. It happened to be the Queen Mary. We formally boarded her. I was assigned a group of people to take care of, which was my first assignment as an officer. We shoved off. It was a ship that of course, as you know from its speed and agility, went off on its own, never in a convoy. So we zigzagged our way across the Atlantic.

I can remember a couple things about that journey. One was, the wooden rails on the Queen Mary were still there. Of course a lot of the soldiers had little knives with them and they all were in favor of cutting their initials into the railing of the Queen Mary. I don't think that was above me either. Also there were a lot of fittings on the ship that reminded you of its glory days, but it was basically pretty stripped. The other thing I remember was the British were manning the gun on the rear of the ship, on the stern. They held practice firing rounds like twice a day. I just thought to myself, "How useless, because if somebody is going to take this ship down, it was going to be a submarine with torpedoes and not any other way." The other thing I remember is that we had a rough passage and everybody was seasick! It was a horror because they were just packed in. You tried to get up on deck to get some reasonably fresh air, but the decks were jammed, too. That was really one loaded ship! But we made it in about 5 or 6 days.

I can remember coming into the west coast of England. It was a beautiful day, absolutely calm; everything seemed calm and quiet and still, except for the seagulls flying around. I just couldn't believe that country was at war! You just couldn't believe it! It was just marvelous in terms of its stillness and beauty. I don't know where it was that we came in; I've never been able to find that out.

Q: I might point out that, on the Queen Mary, they didn't replace those wooden rails. They kept the initials on to show its wartime service. (Laughing)

GEHRON: That's probably true. I guess it would be a great memento and certainly a reminder of a very, very difficult time, particularly for the British.

Q: Yes. Well, then what happened? You got in by the way about what, in March or...?

GEHRON: No, the Battle of the Bulge was in December of '44 and I got in about a month after that. I got actually into a front line unit about a month after the Bulge.

Q: Sounds like February.

GEHRON: Yes, we're talking about January or February. As I mentioned, I landed in England. It was just unbelievable because it was so quiet and calm. Then I remember taking a train and ending up in South Hampton. And I don't remember anything about that train ride. I don't remember anything about South Hampton, except that it was probably a teeny port at that period, I would imagine. But, again, we were focused in the narrow world.

One thing I do remember about South Hampton was that we had to cross the channel, of course, and we went right from the train to the boat that was going to take us across the channel. It was an old Polish freighter that they had recruited one way or another. I remember that we were put down in the hold. I mean really in the hold, in the bowels of the ship, basically. It was an introduction to my first command really, other than the one on the Queen Mary. I was placed in charge of a group of men down in that hold. There was only one access out of that hold, a very narrow stair at that. I remember saying to myself, "You know if you're going to be a leader, you must demonstrate it, and that means stay as far away from that access stairwell as you possibly can, and show the people with you that you're not concerned." I was concerned, because we had the possibility of mines and torpedoes crossing the channel. It was an instance where you had to talk yourself into doing something that perhaps in another capacity you would never have done. But I did do that, and I can say that fortunately we got across the channel in a convoy in good shape.

Q: Then what happened?

GEHRON: We ended up in Le Havre, and that was where I really began to see the horror of war. That place was just devastated and I couldn't believe it. Buildings were all down, the waterfront was an absolute mess, and cranes were bent over all this way and that way. It just was horrifying to me, particularly after that landing in England and then coming just across the channel and seeing this devastation in France.

I don't remember too much about that. I released the troops I had on the convoy boat. They went one way and I got into a little vehicle with about six or eight others. They trucked us out in the direction of what were then the front lines of the battlefield. I don't remember how long it took us to get there, but we went to what in those days they called a repo-depo.

Q: Right, a replacement depot.

GEHRON: That's a replacement depot where single officers go and then the unit just plucks them out of those repo-depos and puts them into their own unit. I was there for a

couple of days. It was a very desolate time because the people you're with, you don't know where they're all going to go. So you don't make friends or try to establish friendships. It was kind of lonely and not a very attractive place to hang around.

Q: It was a system that, in retrospect, was really rather poor because it didn't breed unit cohesion. This is true also for the regular troops, the enlisted people. I mean there was too much of this impersonal putting people into places. It would have worked better if they had tried to develop going in groups and that sort of thing.

GEHRON: I think that's right. I think that one of the big problems here and maybe one of the reasons why this system was developed. When I ended up with my platoon, I happened to be, now this sounds like a made up story, but I think it's quite accurate, the 13th platoon leader of that platoon. My tech sergeant had fought all the way through from North Africa into Italy and on up into Germany. He was a survivor. But there are a lot of people who did get wounded or in some instances killed who were platoon leaders, and they had to supply fresh bodies to fill that slot. I think there wasn't much they could do in terms of bringing you from training on as a unit, though. They had to bring you in almost as an individual and just slide you in that slot, and that's what happened to me.

Q: What division unit and type did you go to?

GEHRON: I ended up in the Third Army, which was General Patton's Army, in the Fourth Armored Division, and I was in the Tenth Armored Infantry Battalion. That's kind of an interesting little sidelight there. I was trained as an infantry officer, so I thought I'd be slopping along in the mud when I got over to Europe. But I joined Patton's Army; he, of course, was a great advocate of the use of tanks. His Third Army was essentially a tank unit and had a large tank unit within it. They therefore developed this strategic concept where they would have these tank units, to the extent that they could break through a front line, sometimes do a flanking movement and attack from the side. But as the war was progressing and somewhat running down, it changed. What they were trying to do, I think, if I got their strategy right, was to break through the front lines, and move as far to the rear as they possibly could. Thus they created as much commotion as possible and maybe frightened the front line troops about what was happening behind them into pulling back to correct that situation. Meanwhile the reserves, who were usually not very good, were trying to counter the attacking tank force. I think that system worked pretty well toward the end.

Now I got there, I think just after they crossed the Moselle River. I joined Company C and I ended up being the platoon leader of one of the platoons. I remember that as a very interesting experience for me at that age. I was, as I said, a 20-year-old guy when I came into the platoon. They were just pulled back from the front lines, and they were cleaning their weapons and having dinner. When I say having dinner, I mean everybody was doing their own thing. I was dropped off and I walked in very unceremoniously. They just put you there, and there you were. I remember walking in and kind of nodding at people, but nobody gave me much of the time of day. This is another one of these new blokes who's coming along. Finally, I sat down and some nice older guy came over and came up to me

and said, “Well, Lieutenant, would you like something to eat?”

And I said, “That would be great.” And that kind of broke the ice. He really helped me feel that I finally was beginning to move in on their world. I felt very isolated for the first hour or so. Later, I mentioned this to this tech sergeant. I said, “You know, you didn’t seem to be too glad to see me.”

And he said, “Oooh, you’ve got it all wrong, lieutenant. I was sooo happy to see you. I didn’t want that command. I just wanted to get back to my old job.”

And that was it. As I mentioned, I think I was supposedly the 13th guy who came in as an officer in that battalion.

It wasn’t very long before I had my first experience in combat. I was with the unit for maybe about a day. We had a couple of very good strategic planners with the tank forces. One was a General Abrams, who had the Abrams tank named after him. He was our combat command leader and a Colonel Cohen, who was a big sidekick of Abrams, and very adept at the use of tanks and tank strategy. Colonel Cohen was my combat commander. He called all the officers in to tell them of the next day’s movement. This was about a day after I had arrived, as I said. I remember sitting there and seeing these guys, all pretty grizzled-looking, tough, hardened combat people. I looked around the room and thought, “Wow, I don’t know if this is the calling for me or not (laughing).”

The next thing I know, Colonel, I mean, then Colonel Abrams came into the room, cigar in mouth, then in hand, and he came in this very gruff way said, “Colonel Cohen? What do you want? What do you need?”

And Colonel Cohen said, “I don’t need anything! I just want guys in here with blood and guts, and I got ‘em!” (Laughing)

And I thought, “Maybe I’m in the wrong room here.” (more laughing).

As it turned out, that’s all he wanted. The next morning about 5:30 we clamored on the tanks and off we went. We broke through the enemy lines.

Q: This is around where?

GEHRON: You know, I honestly don’t remember. I tried to track that down, and I couldn’t. I haven’t tried terribly seriously, but I can’t remember where it was.

Q: The Third Armies had been stuck in Metz and Verdun, so it was probably on that way towards the Rhine.

GEHRON: I think the repo-depo was very close to Metz or Verdun, and it was around that area, yes. We had a long line across Germany that we were going to be making. But in any event, that morning was my first morning in combat. Again, you go back to the

horrors of war. You don't think of it at the time, but looking back on it—houses burning, and guys running around shooting, and machine guns going. It just is another world out there, I must say.

Q: What were you actually doing? Were you on a tank or were you in a truck camp type vehicle?

GEHRON: No, the armored infantry were developed to ride on top of the tanks. We'd have about six or eight of us sitting on the top of the tank. In those days, Patton, in his wisdom or lack thereof, wanted his tank commanders to be seen. He wanted them chest high out of the tank turret. So we'd be up there communicating with the tank commander. Some of them remained up there, but when the shooting started, they went for cover (laughing), shut the hatch, and we'd be out there sitting on top of the tank as it was rolling along. The concept was a good one, as I say, the idea of breaking through, getting to the rear of the enemy troops. When you ran into resistance, the tanks would stop, the armored infantry would jump off, and they'd then move on as infantrymen. What you did was carry your infantrymen with you, until a point where you needed them literally to get on the ground and start fighting. It was a system that worked pretty well.

Q: Did you find that in the Third Army you had to wear a tie, and a helmet, and all that sort of thing?

GEHRON: We certainly wore helmets, but I don't ever remember wearing a tie, although that might have been the case.

Q: Patton was renowned for discipline.

GEHRON: He was a stickler for discipline and what have you. I never saw him, but I do remember pictures of him with his pearl-handled guns. He was an irascible man. I mean he gave his troops a pretty tough time. The idea of the tankers being out of the tank, chest-high, is an indication of that. I remember one of my colleagues, who came with me and joined the unit the same time I did and was another platoon leader. He was a very gung-ho guy, unlike me. He had taken after Patton. He was walking around with a pearl handled revolver on each hip. I stayed pretty far away from him (laughing). I wasn't sure just what kind of a lieutenant he'd turn out to be.

I do also remember the first time that I really knew what I was in for. We had broken through the lines, as I say. We moved maybe three or four miles down the road and we ran into heavy artillery. The tanks stopped and we all jumped off. I just remember a cemetery near where we stopped and we ran in there for cover. There was a stonewall and small arms fire. A shell came whizzing in and landed near a couple of my platoon's enlisted men. When the shell landed, I heard someone say, "I'm hit!" And I looked over and sure enough, he was on his chest, stretched out, and his buttocks were pretty well blown off. That was really my first experience of knowing where I was and how I'd put myself there.

Q: How did it go during this time?

GEHRON: Actually, I think I was pretty lucky. I did see enough combat--I'm very proud of this--to win my Combat Infantryman's Badge and I gained a Presidential Unit Citation, which are the two things that I treasure very much in terms of my own personal life in the army. I was with a magnificent unit. It was really a great outfit. We were good at what we did.

The war was running down. The units that were doing a lot of the fighting were SS, storm troopers, the elite Nazi military. They were very good, too. But I think the Germans at that point were beginning to realize that after the Battle of the Bulge, the chances of Germany coming back in any way were pretty close to nil. I think their morale was really beginning to drop. That helped in the U.S. forces in any kind of a combat situation because I think we always felt that we had the upper hand. I know, and I can remember being a very confident officer. I never really entertained any thoughts of being hit one way or another. That's a very strange experience and I've never really thought about it until now. It could well be my confidence was built up because we were winning, and we were doing so well.

Q: Did you get involved in crossing the Rhine?

GEHRON: No. The route that I remember taking, I can't recall getting across the Rhine, to be perfectly honest with you. I should go back and examine some of this, which I've not done very seriously. The place where I kind of pick up and remember is going into a place called Erfurt, and Chemnitz and places like that. I don't remember the actual crossing of the Rhine, although we had to do it! (Laughing) That's not something that sticks in my craw.

Q: Well now, General Abrams, I think he was Colonel Abrams at the time...

GEHRON: He was Colonel Abrams then, yes.

Q: There was this attempt to go to a prisoner of war camp where Patton's son-in-law was.

GEHRON: You're right.

Q: Did you get involved in that?

GEHRON: I did not get involved in that, but it happened on my watch and that was a catastrophe of the first order. There is some story; I don't know how true it is. As you say, Patton's son-in-law was a prisoner in that camp. Patton maintained that it was someplace where he just wanted to free the Americans who were there. Others say, "Well, you know, there's a very big pull in terms of getting your own son-in-law out of the clutches of the Germans."

In any event, that unit did go in and they got to the camp and they broke the camp open, but then the Germans regrouped and when they tried to get out of that situation, they were just massacred. Not all of them were. There were some who did come back, but it was a very bad piece of strategy, I think.

Q: One of the things one notes is that the Germans were particularly adept at putting together scratch units, and counterattacking them. I mean, you could get somewhere, but they didn't dissolve.

GEHRON: That's true. Another thing that was very disconcerting was that they started arming very young kids. I don't know when they started doing that, but they had 14 and 15-year-olds who were very pro-Hitler and pro-Germany. You'd go into towns not only with the regulars shooting at you, but these young people as well and they were ferocious in some respects. One idea I do remember was that tank units, in order not to get bogged down, would avoid the big cities where you had street-to-street fighting. They would go into the smaller towns and take those over and just keep running and running and we would do that.

I can remember an instance. This is one of those things where the person who is a leader can get you moving. I was with my men, and a tank had been knocked out in front of us, and we were moving up to clean out the people who had knocked the tank out. There was a wall on both sides of the road going all the way down to where this tank was knocked out. The people who had done the firing were on higher ground. At the end of the road, beyond where the tank had been knocked out, was a caserne, which is a building where the German troops would quarter. There were a number of guns pointing up in our direction from the artillery placement. I remember being up against the wall and wondering what I should do next, when who should come along but Colonel Cohen, a pretty tough guy. He was a cigar smoker like Colonel Abrams. He called out and asked, "Who's the lieutenant in charge here?"

And I kind of looked back and said, "I am sir." (laughing)

"What the hell ya doin' here?"

And I said, "Well, I'm waiting sir to determine where I should move."

And he said, "Move right straight ahead, that's where you should move."

So that's what I did, I started moving right straight ahead. I got down to where the tank had been knocked out and about half way to where this caserne was, where I thought there was going to be a hoard of German soldiers. I looked back and none of my men were following. (Laughing) I had jumped at the colonel's command, but they hadn't. So I had to stop and, by arm signals, finally encourage them to join me down there and then we moved on. As it turned out, we didn't knock off the people who had knocked out the tank. When we got to the caserne, there was nobody there fortunately, and the townspeople told us that about a half an hour before, most of the German forces had

pulled out.

Q: Colonel Cohen, didn't he later go to Israel? I thought there was somebody, Daniel Cohen, or something?

GEHRON: Well, you know, I lost track of him. I always thought he ran some kind of a textile mill and was a very wealthy young man in South Carolina or someplace. I don't honestly know what happened to him after the war. I might just add, though I never saw the issue, that Time Magazine in some issue during this period of time claimed that Cohen and Abrams were two of the ablest tank commanders in the whole war. So they were very able and knowledgeable people when it came to tank warfare.

Q: When you got past the caserne, where did you go?

GEHRON: We kept the town. That wasn't very difficult. We kind of cleaned the streets up and then our tanks came in behind us and that was that.

Q: How did you find the German populace?

GEHRON: Mixed. Some of them welcomed us. They were fed up with the war, I think, and knew it was a lost cause. Some of them didn't like the idea that we were coming in there, of course. One of the problems for them that I always felt sorry about, was that this was a battle where Patton wanted the Germans to know that the Americans had been there. So our orders were essentially to go in and give them a very hard time, which meant destroy as much as you can. We'd go into an area of the town with machine guns going, and tracers flying. In those days, many of houses had thatched roofs. I can remember those roofs just going up in flames. But the Germans, dogged as they were, I remember, too, you'd see a couple of men up there swatting the flames out while a couple of women were out there putting new thatching up. You know, it really was amazing.

This was the German mindset, I guess, determination that they weren't going to be beaten down, and they were going to save what they had. Many times as we would move along, there would be houses with white flags flying out the window, and other signs that they wanted to call it quits. The further you got into Germany, the truer that became. It became so apparent at that point that the war was over.

This may be a good point to say something about our liberation of the prison camp at Ohrdruf. On the morning of April 47th, we came upon the town of Ohrdruf. Just beyond its immediate limits we found ourselves before a barracks surrounded by a fence. The campsite, which was on a small rise, was called Ohrdruf after the town. There was an entrance to the place where just inside there lay hundreds of corpses, all in striped uniforms, each with a bullet hole in the back of the skull. Further in were several long pits where there were many more corpses, mostly naked, young, old, male and female, stacked to a depth of three bodies or so, partially covered with lime. There were also a few bewildered living among the dead.

This was the first of the prison/concentration camps to be discovered and liberated. It was a shock to Eisenhower who informed Churchill who, in turn, circulated photos of the scene to all the members of his Cabinet. So appalled were the leaders of our units that they forced the people of Ohrdruf to march through the camp to see first hand what had taken place. Most of the citizens denied they were even aware of what was going on at the camp. To me, that was impossible, for I could see myself that farmers were plowing their fields around the perimeter of the place and had to be well aware of the prisoners in their striped uniforms and their treatment. Suffice to say that at the conclusion of the towns' folks visit, the mayor and his wife committed suicide.

At the risk of being boring, there is an addendum I'd like to put to this Ohrdruf story. A friend of ours who lives in Maryland, John Wiernecki, during a visit at our house said he was writing about his life as a Pole in German concentration camps. At my mention of Ohrdruf, he explained that he was held as a prisoner there and was one of the few inmates the SS had taken along with them in their retreat. He was enlisted to carry their baggage. He witnessed the carnage the SS meted out that last day of German control. That day was April 3rd, less than 24 hours before my arrival there. We just missed bumping into each other in very strange circumstances. By the way, his book has just been published. It is titled War in the Shadow of Auschwitz.

Q: How did you find your platoon adapted to you?

GEHRON: It worked out pretty well, I think, all things being equal. As I mentioned, I did have a very good second-in-command, my tech sergeant, a real battle veteran. He was a very sharp guy. I tried to be a leader and be out in front, and he was the guy who usually brought up the rear. But there were times, when I'd be moving along a ridge or something, and I'd hear a voice say, "Lieutenant, you want to get over there, get down." That was the tech sergeant giving me instructions from his previous knowledge, saying "Hey, don't be a fool and expose yourself up there." So I had something like a horseshoe back there. (laughing)

The men really were good. I never had any problems. I had one sergeant I had a disciplinary problem with. We went into a town. The GIs (enlisted men) were really very good for the most part. I had a sergeant who went in and tried to attack a German girl, and that was most unfortunate, but other than that I don't really remember a serious problem with our guys.

Now I should immediately add to that. As we went into Germany, there was a policy from on high that there would be no fraternization with the Germans, anybody, any German person, man, woman, or child. When we first got into Germany, we'd take over a town, and we'd stay there for the night before moving on. I was trying to enforce this no fraternization problem, but you've got a bunch of GIs there. They were gung ho, and "frauleins" (unmarried German women) were attracted to them, indeed to me; it was a policy you really couldn't enforce. I remember the first time I did try to enforce it. I got up one morning about 5:15 and there was a Hitler youth group out in the town square in blouses and shorts, a group of women, young women, exercising. The men were standing

around cheering and they were having a ball. And I said, "All right fellas, let's break this up." Well, you can imagine I didn't get very far. The young woman, who was the Hitler youth movement leader, was pretty ferocious, and she liked the idea of the GIs being around there, so I had a tough time. I did break it up, but that was the last time I ever figured I was going to do that. From there on I really didn't enforce that non-fraternization policy.

Q: What about the sergeant who tried to attack the German woman? What happened?

GEHRON: Actually, I should say that it went further than that. I didn't want to go that far. But he actually did rape the young woman. He left our unit. I think he was disciplined. The only thing I know is that, whatever they did to him, or wherever they took him, he asked for me to serve as his defense. I don't know why he'd do that when I was there in the area where the incident took place, but I took that as gesture that he had some faith in me. But I don't know what happened. That's really the only serious episode of that nature that I can recall.

Q: What was end game for you? You're moving into Germany and towards the Czech border.

GEHRON: Right. It's kind of interesting, because my wife and I just traveled to Eastern Europe recently. We went to Budapest, then Vienna, and then Prague. Because we were going to Prague, I told her that I'd like to take a sentimental trip back to the area that I was in at the end of the war in May of 1945. It was about 50 miles west of Prague.

To answer your question now, we were given orders to move south and then east into Czechoslovakia. We went in through what I call a Bohemian forest; I don't know what it's called today. It was about 5,000 feet up. We were going after the Germans in Prague, we thought, because of the possibility that they had tried to establish a redoubt in the Czech area. We were to take Prague; that was really our objective. We crossed the Czech border and went into Czechoslovakia, goodness knows how many miles. I remember going in through this forest. I thought, "This is the wrong place to be." We were on tanks, and we were on a dirt road, and there was a forest built up on each side of us. If we were attacked, I remember figuring we would never turn those tanks around. We were sitting ducks. As it turned out, we weren't attacked, and we got through and ended up near a Czech town called Blatno.

Let me fast forward here and tell you about a recent visit my wife and I made to Eastern Europe where we ended our trip in Prague. Realizing we would be close to the town of Blatno, I suggested to my wife that we might try to arrange a visit to that area. I wrote the mayor of Blatno and mentioned that I had been with the liberating forces that came in there at the end of World War II and did he think there was anybody around who might like to reminisce about this. I got a very nice letter back from a woman member of the town council saying they would welcome us and would arrange a program. When we got to Prague, they had indeed set up a program for us. They picked us up in Prague and had me address a group of former Blatno citizens currently living in Prague who remembered

the American liberation. We exchanged reminiscences and it was clear to me and my wife that these people had very vivid memories of those brief two weeks when American forces were stationed there. And well they might, for they had been oppressed for the Nazi years and with the coming of the Russians they had some 40 plus years of the same.

We then motored to Blatno. On our arrival, there was an American flag flying outside the town hall. Inside we met with the mayor and the town council. The mayor then led us to the council chamber where a group of some 100 people were awaiting us. I told them of my remembrances and asked for theirs. They reacted by speaking of what they remembered of the Americans being in their town. They brought along photos, hoping I would recognize soldiers they had known years before. There was other memorabilia as well, all of which the mayor said had not seen the light of day since the U.S. forces had left. We then sang a number of World War II songs in English. As the meeting concluded, I remember one man saying that they really welcomed the Americans and clearly they did, as was shown in this meeting. It was a wonderful feeling on the part of the Czechs for the very brief period we were there. We really must have made an unforgettable impression. I remember one citizen saying, "We hope we never have to count on people coming from the West to save us. But if we have to be saved again, we do want them to be from the West." That was a kind compliment, I think, to the allies who came in and put an end to their nightmare at least temporarily.

At lunch after the meeting an old man asked if he could take us to the spot where he remembered seeing the Americans entering the area those many years ago. Believe it or not, he took us to the forest road I mentioned earlier. I was on the exact spot where I had been 55 years ago almost to the day. He showed us a local monument at a cross road dedicated to our unit as liberators of that area in Czechoslovakia.

Q: Where you run across Sudeten Germans at that point, because that would have been the area where there were the so-called Sudeten-Deutsch.

GEHRON: Right, that's true. They very well could have been. I'm not sure, but I think probably a lot of those people moved out as the American forces were coming closer to them.

Q: Did many of them did escape and head back to Germany?

GEHRON: Yes, yes. I remember the time there. It was really a wonderful time. We did literally liberate that little area of Czechoslovakia. The Russians of course were in Prague and the major part of Czechoslovakia, but we had this little area. I always kind of maintained my own little story that my platoon, I think, at the end of the war was the furthest east of the American forces into Czechoslovakia. The map that I've seen in the archives tends to suggest that may be true. In any case, it's a good story. The Czechs were very nice, and of course we were there for about two weeks. Then we had to pull out.

But in that period of time, about two days after we initially got there—it was just before

the war had ended officially--we ran into the Russians. That was a motley group. I can remember them coming in. Their artillery unit guns were all dirty. They were riding on vehicles that were some German, some Russian. But almost all of them had no tires. They were riding on rims. They brought along their camp followers, and they didn't seem to know where they were going. They went through about three times before they finally found where they wanted to go or thought they wanted to go. It was an interesting moment. They greeted us and we greeted them as friends. We were both on the same side, of course, at that point in time.

One other thing I remember about meeting the Russians. We were having an officers' party. This was a day or two after the end of the war. There was a lot of drinking going on. Some Russian officer rode up on a motorcycle and saluted us all. We saluted him and he joined the party. He toasted us all and took a bottle of vodka and just drank it right down, saluted us all, walked out, got on his motorcycle, and rode off into the night, and I don't know what ever happened to him. (Laughing) I can't imagine he made it to wherever he was going.

Finally we did have to pull out of Czechoslovakia. At that time, my platoon was guarding 2,000 SS men in a quarry. There was a high-ranking Austrian general there, too. I don't know his name and don't remember who he was. He was complaining to me. I was the officer in charge of the encampment. The Germans were treating him roughly and not how his rank would warrant. He wanted private quarters. I said to him, "Look, you guys opted for that side, and you're going to have to stay with that side." That wasn't very pleasing to him. Shortly after that, we had to pull out, and the Russians came in. I don't know what happened to those 2000 people after the Russians came in.

Q: I doubt if many made it back.

GEHRON: I would be inclined to think that's probably true. It's interesting, because when my wife and I made this trip, I raised that question once. I thought somebody might remember this quarry and the prisoners. That part of Czechoslovakia is a stone quarry area. The one time I mentioned it in a group, I didn't see anybody who gave me a sign of recognition, except one person in the back of the room kind of nodding his head. Now I don't know if he was falling asleep, or whether he in fact was saying, "Yes, I do remember." It may be an episode that no one wants to remember. But that was it. We then pulled out and went back to Germany. I ended up staying with the army of occupation there.

Q: Where did you go back to?

GEHRON: Augsburg became our headquarters. Our unit was in a German caserne in some small town. That was really kind of a police action. We were really keeping order, is the best way to put it, after having been fighting. We were not the best of guys. We tended to go out and steal eggs, because we didn't get many fresh eggs. We took chickens from the farmers. We had a Texan ranch hand as one of our platoon officers. So we'd go out and get a cow and bring it back, and he'd butcher it, and we'd have some steaks and

so on. It was that kind of an existence. We were pretty free; there wasn't much command structure over us. We were a bunch of young guys. We took German cavalry horses and rode all over the place at breakneck speed. We were shaved by SS barbers, and we had a German band playing for us at dinner. It was just that kind of an existence.

Q: How long did that last?

GEHRON: I really can't remember, but I would think that I was there for about three or four months, maybe three months. It was a sad time, too. The Germans didn't really have anything at that point. I can remember, it was a horrible thing to do when I look back on it, but just to show you how downtrodden and how dismayed they were, I can remember people taking cigarette butts, the end you couldn't smoke. We would just throw them out the window and watch to see if the German citizen walking by would try to pick the butts up. Almost invariably they would. What they'd try to do is get enough of them so they could make one cigarette out of it. It was really very sad. That was a horrible thing to do. You're young and you don't think about these things. We were the conquering army after all.

Q: What happened to you after that?

GEHRON: It's not a very interesting story. I went to England and got on a liberty ship to come home. I got about a day's sail out of England when we dropped a propeller and we had to go back. It took the English and their shipyards two to three weeks to put that propeller back (laughing) and during that time I rode a horse a lot. I found a horse someplace and rode around the king's forest near Southampton. I had a great time.

But I was anxious to get home. You know it's very funny. I can remember things started going through my mind about home and being back. There were things that I never really had a great taste for, like lobster. I'd never eaten lobster when I was young, but I had to have a lobster. That was something I was looking forward to. I wanted to taste a hot dog; it was just something that I couldn't wait for. These small things were going through my mind. It was just the idea that you were going home and you could get these things again.

The ship did finally get put together, and we came to New York harbor. Unlike our departure, there was no Red Cross and no band or anything else to greet us; we were just there. I can remember coming in past the Statue of Liberty. There was a loud crack. A flash of lightening came down and literally hit our ship. I took that as a pretty boisterous welcome home. That was about it.

I went off to Fort Dix again, where I had started my army career. I ended up being processed out in time to go home and think about college, where I didn't want to go, by the way.

Q: What did you do then?

GEHRON: I got home and my parents told me that Williams College had kept a place for

me, which was very nice of them, keeping a spot for three years. I was still fairly young and kind of a pretty wild guy at that point. I was into some drinking and carousing, and I didn't want that life to stop particularly. I told my parents I didn't think I wanted to go to Williams.

They suggested, "Well, why don't we just go up and look at the campus, and then you can maybe make up your mind if you want to go."

So I agreed to that. It was while I was still on military service and I remember my father wanted me to wear my uniform to impress the dean. So I did that. It was legal because I wasn't officially discharged from the army until October of that year. This was '46. I went up to the college. We were spending the night at the William's Inn. When I was speaking to the dean with my father, I'd forgotten whether the dean said to me, "May I speak to Bill alone?" or whether my father said, "I'll go off and let you speak to him." But anyway I was alone with the dean and I spoke to him for a while. I was beginning to come around.

Q: It was Dean Brooks, wasn't it?

GEHRON: It was Dean Brooks. He was very personable and he could talk you into coming (laughing). My story is that I left his office pretty much inclined to stay, but if I had any doubts, they were destroyed by the fact that my mother and father had pulled out of the Williams Inn and driven home and left me stranded there. (Laughing). So I really didn't have any choice. I thought, "They are two pretty wise folk, I must say." They knew what was best for me. I didn't. I ended up staying at Williams and enjoying my four years there.

Q: I had to pull a record to say this is where we converge. I had not gone into the military service at that point. I was a young prep school kid and I came to Williams in the fall of '46. We're both Class of 1950. In a way, it was two different worlds, the veteran's world and the people out of the civilian world at that time.

GEHRON: Yes, that's true. I don't know how many veterans there were up there.

Q: I think the class was limited to about 1100 people and veterans number about 70 percent of the class. This is 1946.

GEHRON: Yes, the class ahead of our class, I know, was pretty heavily loaded with veterans. I didn't think our class had that many.

Q: Well, maybe it wasn't quite that much. All I know is that after a while it was interesting being just a kid coming in. All of a sudden I developed a lot of almost veteran's habits, just by rubbing shoulders with you all. (Laughing)

GEHRON: I hope they were the good habits, and not the bad. (Laughing)

Q: When I got caught up in June of 1950 in the Korean War, I had a veteran's attitude towards things, which changed later on.

GEHRON: Well, that's very good!

Q: How did Williams strike you at the time?

GEHRON: I came with this attitude of perhaps not wanting to be there, but thinking maybe I should be. I was coming in on kind of a dual track there. At first, I didn't take to it too readily, but I had a good roommate, a fellow named Bud Cool, who ended up being a football star at Williams. Buddying around with him helped a lot. He was not a veteran, but he was a wonderful guy. I began to really enjoy Williamstown and its small town aspect. That warmed my heart quite a bit in very short order when I was there. I liked the idea of camaraderie that seemed to materialize on campus. You knew an awful lot of people when you walked around. I very quickly found myself being absorbed by this really wonderful community of students and faculty.

Q: What dormitory were you in?

GEHRON: It's the one that was next to the observatory, the old observatory, and I can't remember what that was. After I was pledged, I moved rather quickly into the fraternity, because they had room there, so I didn't spend very much time in a dorm. That was lucky or unlucky, depending on how you looked at it. By the way, I was told by the faculty fraternity advisor that I had received more bids than any student up to that time. That partly was because I seemed rather mature after my Army years.

Q: What fraternity did you go into?

GEHRON: I was in Sigma Phi, which was the old Rensselaer house, a wonderful place. It's not there any longer and I don't even know if it exists anywhere. I think they took it down stone by stone and I don't know what they did with the stones. It was a wonderful house. I enjoyed that. Looking back on it and even at the time I was there, I began to have second thoughts about fraternity life. I felt that it was awful for the people who did not make it.

Q: Yes, about a third or something like that. I went to the Garfield House. It was not good. Looking back on it, one sort of wince.

GEHRON: Yes, I definitely wince. In fact, I went further than that. After I left college, I was briefly on the board of Sigma Phi and I remember that we had a meeting. I think it was in the old Williams Club in New York. There was a question as to whether there would be a black student brought in or not. There were a number of people who were negative. I felt that was outrageous and so I left the board at that point and left the fraternity. I've never gone back. But I had that feeling of exclusivity even when I was up there. I thought it was a bad system really.

Q: I can remember debates on whether Jews should be admitted, which was really incredible when you think about it, after World War II and all that, to have this thing still hanging over us. Our society was going through a shaking out, and I think we were the last vestiges of the old, rather exclusive society there.

GEHRON: Well, I think that's probably true. Interestingly enough, this is kind of a sidebar, I just was reading in The New Yorker about Tiger Woods. One of the things that the article mentioned was that the PGA (Professional Golfers' Association) Tour had a clause in it from 1939 to 1961 saying that only members of the Caucasian race could join the tour. That's pretty far along. The article said that even the tour players at that time were not particularly promoting the idea of bringing in other ethnic groups. It was a funny time; it was a very strange time.

Q: Yes, and of course we had that civil rights thing. Later there were still residues, but certainly up to the 1960s there were real problems.

GEHRON: Oh, yes, very definitely.

Q: What did you major in and how did the courses strike you?

GEHRON: I could answer that in part by saying that my father was very interested in having me come into the firm and carry on the tradition of architecture. When I went to Williams, I was fearful of that, and I knew I was not a student of math at all. Engineering was not my boat, and therefore architecture probably wasn't either. There's a lot of figuring to do there, although design and that kind of concept are most important. I did not do well in math; I had to be tutored during one summer to really make up and get my math up to speed. I was not very language proficient either. I took French and Spanish. It was a terrible combination, as I couldn't get one straight as opposed to the other. I did do one smart thing. My major was American history and literature and that was with Charles Keller and a young man, I can't remember his name. They both taught the course. Each sat at one end of the conference table. Fred Rudolf taught in the tradition of Keller after Keller left. I think he was mixed up in that milieu, too. But in any event, there were about eight or ten of us at the table. It was just a stimulating time. I just looked forward to that. It was wonderful. It took place in that charming building next to the chapel, but I can't remember what it was named.

Q: I want to say Goodrich Hall, but I'm not sure.

GEHRON: It could have been Goodrich Hall.

Q: It had a beautiful window and it was a gorgeous place. I had some courses in that building.

GEHRON: Yes, yes. It was a wonderful setting with wonderful teachers. You couldn't have asked for anything more and very stimulating courses. That American history and literature course was rather new then, too, I think.

Q: I didn't take it, but I took some excerpts from it. Reading things like you were reading. Looking at Uncle Tom's Cabin and what its impact was. It was well done.

GEHRON: Yes, it was. It was very, very well done and I enjoyed that tremendously. It's very funny, at my age, in coming out after three years of military service, I went out for the baseball and track teams at Williams, which I'd done fairly well at, particularly in high school and prep school. I found I couldn't compete with what I considered then as your generation, your age people. They were just outdoing me at every turn. I really did not find that I undertook any kind of an athletic career at Williams at all. At that point I wasn't any good at it. I had lost it all.

I wasn't very active in extracurricular activities either. I did do some skiing which you always do there. With another fellow frat (fraternity) mate of mine, I was on the radio station. I've forgotten the call letters of it now, WM something. We had a wonderful comedy program, which I thought was pretty funny. I don't know what anybody else thought. Beyond that I really didn't do very much. I guess maybe that was the veteran side of me coming out where I just couldn't get too interested in things.

Q: What about the social side? Williams is sort of isolated. Williamstown, Massachusetts does not have any established female establishment too close. How did that work out?

GEHRON: It was so-so, I think. I had a girlfriend at home at that point, so my interest was kind of limited. We'd go to Smith and some other places around.

Q: Bennington maybe?

GEHRON: Yes, yes, I went to Bennington, I think, a couple of times, but I just couldn't make it there. I don't know why.

Q: They were terribly artsy.

GEHRON: They were. It wasn't that I didn't like that, but I just don't know why.

Q: It's a little bit hard on guys.

GEHRON: Yes, it was hard on guys, very definitely. I do remember one time going down to Smith though. It was very flattering. I walked into one of the girls' dorms, and there was a loud cry of, "Man in the house." All these young women came running down to the commons room. I thought this was really quite a greeting. I found out very quickly that was a time when they could all congregate to smoke down there in the commons room and it had nothing to do with my presence except I was a man in the house and you could do that if there was a man in the house.

Well, I didn't have a big social life there. We'd did the movie thing in town, we'd go to Mike's hamburger place, we would go out maybe drinking to North Adams or places like

that.

Q: Good spaghetti house there.

GEHRON: Yes, and then there were some places out in the mountains here and there, an inn or something like that where you could have a drink and have a plate of spaghetti or something else. That was pretty much it.

Q: You graduated. Was your degree in American history and literature?

GEHRON: Yes, it was. Yes, I got a BA (Bachelor of Arts) degree.

Q: How did that sit with your parents, your father?

GEHRON: As I mentioned, he was hoping I'd come into the architectural firm and they took it very well. I think he was obviously very disappointed, but they did take it very well. It's kind of interesting - you mentioned the Korean War. I came out in 1950 as you did.

Q: We graduated in June.

GEHRON: Right. Let me just add here, since you were a member of the class, that Stephen Sondheim and I received the same number of votes as "most likely to succeed." Guess who did! I also garnered a fourth as "bull session king."

Q: The war started the 25th of June.

GEHRON: That's right, exactly. Once again, I didn't quite know what I was going to do when I got out. I guess a lot of us got out of there not knowing exactly where we wanted to fit in. I did have some thought about advertising with the media. I remember I went down to New York. There were people trying to help me find a job here and there. I think this was on my own, however. I remember I went down to New York and thought I'd poke a head in at NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation), and I did. This was just at the age where television was coming into being. In fact, I can remember about that same time seeing a television set someplace, and seeing an ad for beer on the television. I thought, "This is just going to be unbelievable for the advertising industry and for television. I mean, here you are sitting there, and they're pouring the beer out right in front of your face." Anyway, I went down to NBC. I went back a couple of times. The last time I went back, they said that they were prepared to accept me in their training program. They had a management-training program at that time. I remember coming back, all set to go to work for NBC. I thought that was a real feather in my cap. My mother once again informed me that I had a notice from the president of the United States.

Q: Your buddy. (laughing)

GEHRON: It seemed to be. At that time, of course, it was Harry Truman. The call was that I, as an inactive reservist, was being recalled into the military service and would I please report for duty. I didn't have much time to report. So I was brought back into the military service again for the Korean War. I might just explain how that happened.

Q: Yes.

GEHRON: When I got out of the service at the end of World War II, I was leaving Fort Dix and being processed out. Somebody was saying, "Well, you know, you can get into the active reserve or the inactive reserve, and it might be a good thing. You can hold onto your commission."

At that point I was a first lieutenant, and I said, "I'm really not interested in the military."

The talk went on and they finally said, "Well, why don't you go into the inactive reserve, because you can hold onto your commission and it has to be a national catastrophe of major proportions before you'd ever be called."

So I said, "All right, I'll do it." Well, that was my undoing. That is why I was recalled. They didn't recall the active units at first in the Korean situation. They were calling back individuals who had veteran's experience, training them, and shipping them over to Korea. That's what happened to me.

I ended up again at Fort Dix. I was there a week and quickly caught on to what they were doing. They were bringing people in from outside who had signed up for the inactive reserve, giving them two weeks training, and sending them off to Korea.

While I was on orders to report to Fort Dix, I thought this was very unfair. So I wrote to all of my colleagues who were on orders with me and said, "We can't do much about this, but maybe we can write our congressmen and get some action someplace or at least make them aware of the situation." I remember people calling me, one fellow in particular calling me, saying, "They're calling me back, and I just bought an ice cream business, and I've got a family to support, and I've put all my money into this thing, and there's nobody who can run it for me."

I just had to say, "I'm awfully sorry, but there we are. I'm in pretty much the same boat, but not quite as catastrophic as that." In any event, that's what happened. So I went back into the military service again in 1950.

Q: So what did they do with you?

GEHRON: I was on orders to go to Korea. I was on orders to go in December. That was right, no, I guess it was January. I don't remember when it was. Anyway, it was right after they had called me in. No, it was before December, I think. You said it was December of '50 when the war started.

Q: June. It was started June 25. There had been the Inchon Invasion by this time, and this is when the Chinese entered the war, in December or so.

GEHRON: I went in in June, that's right, shortly after June of '50. I went to Fort Dix; I was on orders to go overseas. They changed the orders, because they were establishing an armored unit at Fort Hood, Texas that was going to be used eventually for service in Korea. They were short of armored officers. Because I had that in my title, they took me off the list for Korea and put me on a list to go out to Fort Hood. That's one of the saving graces of my life! I had no desire to go to Korea if it could be avoided. So I ended up getting married that December and going off with my wife to Fort Hood to create a new armored division. I've forgotten; I think it was the Third Armored Division at that time. So I ended up stateside for the almost two years during the Korean War period as a military officer.

Q: What was the background? How did you meet your wife?

GEHRON: My father being an architect, we knew a sculptor who did some work for my father on various buildings. The sculptor's neighbor was a federal judge by the name of Frank Coleman. He was with the New York District Court. They were good friends. My wife's maiden name was Coleman, and she was one of his daughters. We went up to a party at the sculptor's house, and the Coleman family was there.

Q: Was this in Pelham?

GEHRON: No, this was in Larchmont. They lived in Larchmont. I was introduced to Pat, my wife, and it was pretty much love at first sight. I mean, I was very taken (laughing). That was when we were still pretty young. I was still in college at that point. It was about two or three years later that we finally decided that we'd get married. I had a difficult time convincing her to marry me.

Q: So she went to Marymount?

GEHRON: She went to Marymount College in Tarrytown and was in her senior year. I had been after her to marry me for about a year or so, and finally she decided "Okay, I'll do it," and very nicely left college to marry me. We married in December of 1950. At that time, as I say, I was in the military. We went right out to our posting and ended up at Fort Hood.

Q: While you were at Fort Hood, it gave you some time to think of what you were going to do. Were you thinking at that point of a full military career, or was this just something to get through?

GEHRON: I was never really military oriented. It was something to get through. We really didn't think things out very clearly at that time. You know, when you're in the military, there's a certain routine, and you're just confined to that style of living, and you accept and put up with it. My wife had a hard time, because it was very hot where we

were in Texas. I've forgotten the name of the little town we were in; it wasn't so little then. I can remember coming home from riding around in tanks all day in these dusty deserts and looking like I don't know what. My wife was sitting in one of those canvas chairs, with a hose over her head, waiting for me to come home. It was pretty rough living.

Q: Air conditioning was not around.

GEHRON: It was not around.

Q: I'll put at the end here where we are so we'll know where to pick it up, but we've got you at Fort Hood. You're thinking about what to do. By '52, you're out and so we'll pick it up at that point.

Today is the 21st of September 2000, Bill. It's 1952; what was happening?

GEHRON: I began thinking about what I'd do when I got out of the army, after I might add, having moved about 17 times in 18 months. When I did get out, through a friend, I found a job with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. If you recall, Alger Hiss had been the president of that organization. With Hiss's stigma, so to speak, the organization was looking for somebody on the PR (public relations) side to help pull the organization back up to where it's status had been before. I was pretty young, of course, to be the guy who was to do that, but they did have a PR firm in before me. A friend in that PR firm suggested my name as someone who might carry on and do that job.

Q: Was Joe Johnson there? That sounds like a connection.

GEHRON: Joe Johnson was definitely there. He, of course, was a teacher at Williams College.

Q: A history professor; he was one of mine.

GEHRON: Yes, I never did have him for a class, but he was then the president of the organization. So I worked at the Carnegie Endowment for about two years.

Actually, the one interesting thing there is they had a very interesting program going called "Universities and World Affairs." The thrust of that program was that given the role the U.S. had played up to the war and then the role that it would play after World War II, it was going to take on a more significant and dominant position in the affairs of the world. The people in the Endowment felt that perhaps a lot of colleges and universities were not aware of that situation and had not brought their own teaching staffs up to the level where they could really perform and turn out some internationally minded students. So the program was undertaken, and I think it was quite successful. It was carried out around the country. It was rather interesting to be a part of that. I wasn't

actually involved in the substance part of the program, but just to know that the Endowment was doing that, I thought, was a very constructive thing.

Q: What sort of work did you do?

GEHRON: At that point, the Endowment had bought a building across from the United Nations on UN Plaza. They were trying to create a stronger image of the organization, given the Hiss' stigma. My role was really to try to focus attention on the building and on the organization. I did that by staging conferences in the building. We had rather a large section of the lower portion of the building designated for conferences, exhibitions, and various other undertakings. I tried to organize those things, and direct some attention, particularly of the New York press, to the organization. I think we were reasonably successful.

Frankly, that's how I ended up coming to Washington. One of the exhibitions we had there was the "White House Open Skies Exhibition." The director of that exhibition thought I was doing an okay job for him, and he asked me if I'd like to join him on the White House disarmament staff in Washington. I, of course, leapt at that. I thought it would be a pretty good move. So that's how I actually ended up in Washington.

Q: Can you explain what the Open Skies Proposal was?

GEHRON: I'm getting a little rusty on these things these days. Essentially, it was to open the world skies up to no restrictions, and trying to instill a sense of peace and stability in the world. It was an Eisenhower proposal. It was never bought by the Russians. The White House did try to push it along and they were trying to interest people at the UN (United Nations) in the proposal. That's why the exhibition was put on in the Carnegie Endowment building, right across the street from the UN.

Q: Did you get a feel for the role the Carnegie Endowment for World Peace played with the United Nations at that particular time?

GEHRON: At the time I was there, anyway, they did take an interest in the UN, but most of their attention was concentrated on this "Universities and World Affairs Program." They did have people who were liaisons going over to the United Nations. I don't know what all the various projects were. I can't recall that now. But they did have a reasonably close relationship with people from the UN. But I don't think that was, at that time, a very active role.

Q: In '54 or so you moved over to work in Russia, did you?

GEHRON: Yes. Actually, I was with the Endowment from '52 to '56. I came down to Washington in '56 and joined the White House disarmament staff, which was under the direction of Harold Stassen.

That was a very interesting period for me. There were not many people on the staff, very

few at that time. The disarmament negotiations were going on with the Russians in London. They weren't making terribly great headway. The U.S. had a difficult row to hoe, because we, being more or less the leaders of the Western side, had to coordinate with our major allies and then bring all the rest of the members of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) along on any proposal we made to the Soviet Union. It was quite an undertaking. Stassen, I must say, was a very shy, retiring man. I was quite surprised at that from a politician who was hoping at some point to be president of the U.S. and has consistently run since that time. I think he's still alive; I'm not sure. I'm not sure that he's given up the presidency. In any event, he did finally corral all the allies and present a proposal in London to the Soviet Union. It was not bought by the Soviet Union.

If you also remember, around this time, there was a great deal of nuclear testing being done by both countries. There was a very large hue and cry among the populace, not only of the U.S., but around the world. World leaders and others were condemning these atmospheric tests that we were undertaking. Stassen directed some attention to that problem. The Soviet Union took the position that was the major problem and not complete disarmament of the two sides. Rather the first and most important issue was to put a ban on atmospheric testing. The thought was that they were taking that position so that we wouldn't be able to develop nuclear weapons. That would give them greater conventional strength, and they would then be more dominant than they were should we not maintain our nuclear weapons at the ready by testing. So that became the issue. It was never resolved during the Eisenhower administration. The Soviet Union used it as a propaganda tool. I don't know how serious they were about really trying to ban them. We did have at least one temporary halt without any inspection. It was just both sides in principle saying that they wouldn't test for two, or three, or four years. That seemed to quiet the furor at first. Then the Soviet Union broke that and started testing. The U.S. subsequently began testing again.

Q: I think if I recall the Soviet Union broke it in the middle of a non-aligned conference in Belgrade, which got everybody very upset. The non-aligned came out and said, "Well, Soviet testing is really defensive and American testing is offensive," or something to that effect.

GEHRON: Right. We were, I hate to say it, the whipping boy on this issue. I think it was because the Soviets seemed to be taking a position of "let's just ban these tests, and no inspection; nothing is required, just ban them."

And of course our position was "we'll ban them, but we won't do it unless we can inspect and make sure the ban is really going to be enforced."

So we were the whipping boys in the sense that we were placing conditions on this ban, where the Soviets seemed to be saying, "Let's just ban them," and that appealed to the non-allied countries particularly.

At that point, there also developed a situation where Stassen, in presenting the complete disarmament plan, gave the Soviet Union some figures about troop levels that the British

felt that they weren't consulted about. That created a storm around Stassen. I think John Foster Dulles, who was then Secretary of State, really was looking at a way to unload Stassen from this job of disarmament negotiator. It was becoming a rather big deal in a certain sense. A lot of attention was being directed toward that. Dulles finally decided that he would take over the disarmament negotiations and pulled them over to the State Department. Since that left Stassen out in the cold, he soon disappeared from the scene, and John Foster Dulles had the disarmament negotiations under his control.

Q: What were you doing?

GEHRON: When I first came down on the disarmament staff, I was actually doing the same kind of work I had done at the Carnegie Endowment, the public relations side of it. We were trying to put out pamphlets and informational pieces about what we were trying to do on the arms control and disarmament side. For the small staff we had, I think we were marginally effective in what we were attempting to do.

One thing did come across to me loud and clear. It was the fact that when you are on the White House staff, there is a certain pizzazz about that. It's remarkable what you can get done just by telling people that you are a member of the White House staff. You get an awful lot of people going along with you and that's part of the reason for our success, I think. I remember calling people on the phone, CEOs (chief executive officers) and companies we were trying to get interested in what we were doing and trying to get them to support some portion of our program. Usually you get the secretary and that's it. But when you say, "It's Mr. Gehron calling from the White House," bam, you get right through to the CEO (chief executive officer) and he's on, in person. (Laughter)

Q: You were doing this from '56 to about when?

GEHRON: '60.

Q: '60. Up through the election, then?

GEHRON: Up through the election. Actually when we went over to the State Department, Dulles originally put the disarmament effort in with the atomic energy side of things. There was a fellow by the name of Phil Farley, who was the head of the Office of the Special Assistant to the Secretary for Atomic Energy and Disarmament Matters. That was again a small staff of half a dozen. It was decided that they really had to expand this and give disarmament some kind of a shop of its own. So they set up what was called the Disarmament Commission within the State Department. I should note here that one of my first assignments was to go to New York and join our UN delegation as its disarmament expert. The day I arrived, Henry Cabot Lodge, ambassador to the UN, asked me to draft a response to a Russian speech there, which, to my own amazement, I did.

This name I think you'll remember; that Commission was under the guidance of Ed Gullion. Gullion ran that until Kennedy came into office in 1960. In Kennedy's campaign for office, you may recall, he said that one of the problems was that there were less than

100 people in the U.S. government working on the subject of arms control and disarmament. He said when he was elected, he was going to change that. He was absolutely right. In fact, that probably was an exaggeration, that number of 100. I think there were probably closer to 30 who really were involved in this and felt keenly about it. After he was elected President, he went about setting up the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

I must say that during all this time, in my first time in government, I could sense some of the struggles that were taking place. There were people within the State Department itself who felt that doing anything in the arms control and disarmament field was pie-in-the-sky. There were those people who felt threatened by it. For example, the Atomic Energy Commission felt that if testing were banned, they could no longer ensure the security of the country. They wouldn't have the proper tools to do so without being able to test. There was also the Defense Department, which did not think there was much value in the arms control and disarmament effort.

Q: When you were in the White House and you'd go over to the State Department, what was the feeling towards all this control within the staff? Did you feel this was pie-in-the-sky or was there a feeling that maybe the Soviets would come along?

GEHRON: I think there was a genuine feeling among the staff that something could be done. There was also a feeling that it was going to take a good deal of time and that the Soviets were going to play very tough, which they did. The people I worked with were really dedicated people. Ron Spires was one of those, for example. Jim Goodby and Tom Pickering were others. They were people who really thought that we could get something done in this area. Of course, that was proven to be right when we did get a partial test ban treaty. Kennedy called it the finest act of his administration. Negotiating with the Russians was terribly, terribly difficult. It took patience and toughness and God knows what, because they were almost impossible to deal with. They'd take positions and sit on them for months and it would be very difficult to move them. We were trying to find ways around this. Compromise was our word. I don't know Russian, but I don't even think that word is in the Russian language. They were just slow.

Q: Certainly not in the Communist lexicon. I tell you what, the Russians might or Soviets might be difficult. But when you get right down to it, when you're working on something like this, the people who do the testing at Livermore and other places like that their jobs at stake. You were threatening their rice bowl. How about the reaction you were getting from the nuclear weapons community in the State Department?

GEHRON: Right; very, very negative. The thing was to keep the ball rolling in the face of this negative attitude. As I mentioned, the AEC (Atomic Energy Commission) was rather negative, the Defense Department was rather negative, as was the CIA. Even people in the State Department were negative, in addition to those people whose jobs were on the line out there at Livermore and elsewhere.

The thing that kept the ball rolling, I think, was the fact that the public outcry was

becoming fiercer and fiercer as the testing went on. You might remember those days when they said, “There’s no fear being given radiation dropping out of the sky from these tests. It’s less than you get from a luminous dial on your watch.” People just didn’t believe that. Finally, I think it was in 1954 or 1956, there was the big explosion - the H-bomb (hydrogen bomb) out in the Pacific. When the bomb exploded, there was a Japanese fishing vessel out there that they had overlooked.

Q: The Lucky Dragon.

GEHRON: The Lucky Dragon. When that ship came into port, they found that the fish on the vessel were contaminated. Then when other fishermen came in from fishing the waters out there, they were contaminated too, and the Japanese went into a panic. From there on the panic just seemed to spread. That was what really kept these negotiations going.

Q: There was one time when all of a sudden they were testing and found that there was Strontium-90 in milk in Vermont.

GEHRON: Right, right.

Q: It was really there.

GEHRON: Oh, yes. There are people, and I’ve got a book still in my library written by a nice guy, a former journalist for The Washington Star, Earl Voss. He titled his book, Nuclear Ambush, the Test Ban Trap. He argued at that time that this was a trap and we shouldn’t give up testing. Of course, it’s subsequently been proven that that was a pretty good move. When we did put in the partial test ban, which permitted testing underground, but banned atmospheric and underwater tests and tests in space, then the furor calmed down. That was the first real mark that you could do something in the arms control and disarmament area.

Q: In 1960 to 1961, in the Kennedy administration, what happened to you?

GEHRON: The Kennedy administration appointed John J. McCloy to set up an arms control and disarmament agency. McCloy went about that in a very savvy manner. He was a very savvy man and a very nice man, too. He set the agency up with the help of a fellow by the name of Adrian Fisher. I don’t know if that name rings a bell.

Q: It does ring a bell. He was a management man, wasn’t he?

GEHRON: He was general counsel for The Washington Post at one point, but then he came in eventually as the deputy director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Between the two of them, they set the agency up. Because we were the experienced people, they came to us and said, “Would you people come over and work with us in this agency?” I went over as one of the first people in the agency. The president appointed a fellow by the name of Bill Foster as the director of the agency. He was a republican, but

Kennedy thought it'd be a good idea to put him in there. He had a very good reputation as a hard working guy and I think he believed in what he was doing in the arms control and disarmament side. Adrian Fisher became his deputy. I was in there again doing pretty much the same kind of work I had been doing elsewhere. I tried being spokesman for the agency, defining our positions publicly whenever something happened. That was basically my role.

Q: How long did you do it?

GEHRON: I stayed with the agency until 1966. I went on a number of delegations to Geneva, where really the center of the disarmament negotiations was taking place. First it was in a 10-nation group, then that enlarged and enlarged. I think it's up to about 50 nations now. When it first started, it was a 10-nation disarmament talk, and they met in Geneva. I spent about three years in Geneva on these delegations and literally lived over there.

Q: How knowledgeable were you on nuclear matters?

GEHRON: I was not a great expert, but I was certainly aware of the substance of what was going on and the negotiating positions and took part in discussions about that. We'd have staff meetings every morning. I would sometimes be instructed to take the notes at the meeting and also at disarmament sessions with the other side and also to write cables and things to send back to State.

Q: Did you see a change, first in the Kennedy administration and then maybe move onto the Johnson administration? A new administration always comes in with grand ideas and then the facts come up and hit them in the face and they usually change, maybe for the better, maybe for the worse. Did you notice any change in the Kennedy side of things?

GEHRON: I think the Kennedy side was more realistic about trying to get something done in this field, than say the Eisenhower side. But I think Eisenhower was semi interested in the subject. He saw the need to try to bring about a peaceful solution to the world's problems, but I'm not sure he saw disarmament as necessarily "the" way to do that.

I think there was more emphasis on that in the Kennedy administration. There was emphasis clearly on trying to get something done there and even going beyond the Limited Test Ban Treaty.

Then of course with the assassination of John Kennedy, you had Lyndon Johnson coming in. There again, I think some of the glow of the disarmament effort was lost, although it still persisted of course. The negotiations continued to take place in Geneva. I think the Johnson administration's main focus at that point, if I remember correctly, was essentially on the domestic side. So what we were trying to do was lost sight of, to a certain extent.

Q: How about the Soviets? In the time you were dealing with this, did you see changes in the Soviet approach to things?

GEHRON: When I first came down to Washington, one of the things that impressed me-- I'd never been exposed to this, but I became exposed to Soviet international propaganda. I was absolutely thrown off my feet by the strident way they lambasted the U.S. and we could do no right. I literally thought with each thing I read that war was just around the corner. It was that tough. That attitude seemed to persist when you got into negotiations with them. They had two problems: 1) I don't think they had much in the way of communication from the negotiating table to the hierarchy in the Kremlin. 2) I think their negotiators themselves did not seem to be interested in the subject. They seemed to be playing a political game, rather than literally trying to find an answer to a serious problem. Given those two factors, it was frustrating and very definitely a really tedious task to try to deal with the Soviets.

Q: What about our communications, our instructions? How did we do in those?

GEHRON: We were really very, very good. I was very surprised when I originally went over to the negotiating side to find that you'd send something from Geneva at the end of the meeting and ask for instructions, and the next morning the instructions would be there. It was really very, very well handled. As I mentioned before, we had some very good people doing a lot of this work, and very able people. That helped a great deal. They knew where they wanted to go and knew how they wanted to get there.

Q: One of the things that is a problem is if one country is absolutely stone walling everything and basically saying no; maybe there's no instruction at all. You then find that the other side, which wants something, dances around and keeps making proposals, which essentially, weaken its position. But still the other side isn't giving anything. Was this a problem with us?

GEHRON: Yes, it was. Actually it was one of the areas of domestic criticism about our efforts in the arms control and disarmament field. There was always this feeling that we were caving in to the Soviets. At times it might have seemed that way. We would try to mellow a position a little bit on inspection of a test ban agreement or of a comprehensive test ban agreement or inspection of a cutoff of nuclear production or whatever. The usual play would be, "Oh, here we go again; the U.S. is caving in to the Soviets." It was rather interesting in that respect, because the Soviets would take a position and maintain it. All of their colleagues at that time, the Hungarians, the Romanians, the Bulgarians, and the Czechs, by the way...

Q: The Poles?

GEHRON: Yes, there was a Polish delegation there too; that's right. In those days of course, they didn't do anything but repeat the position of their Soviet leader. There was no support for anything we would do coming from the Soviets. They dominated their own side and nobody could step out of line. So it was a very, very difficult and frustrating

period.

Q: What about our side? I mean the Brits and the French?

GEHRON: The French did not want to participate and so they were not there. The British and the Canadians were pretty good about things, but the British sometimes took positions that ran counter to our views. I may be wrong about this, but the impression I have is that they perhaps didn't want to see things going quite as fast in some areas as they were and perhaps faster in other areas. I can't be very precise about that. I would say generally, as I mentioned before, the U.S. had a very difficult row to hoe. We do tend to be the leader of the western side. It was an absolute must that before you laid down a position, that you had all the allies on board.

By the way, Lord Home was the British representative at these talks. He was an interesting guy. But what I recall is his story of an ancestor who in the course of battle tried to rally his troops by saying, "I am with you," calling out his name, Home, Home, and they all ran home. Therefore he pronounced his name "Hume."

I don't know if you've ever attended a NATO meeting, but I have. I've been on some delegations to NATO. The thing that's always amazed me is how you can get all those nations to finally come up with an agreement on any matter. I mean it's really quite a trick. That's what we had to do on the disarmament side before a position could be laid down. The British, Canadians, and others would sometimes take positions independent of the U.S. position. I think in some cases it was to try to move the negotiations along and break a logjam or perhaps taking a stronger position where they really thought that we were moving too fast.

Q: Was nuclear proliferation a concern at this time?

GEHRON: It was very much a concern, but not the kind of concern that it's become today. But it was a concern. There was a feeling that the nuclear nations then existing should remain as such, and that the world would be much safer if there were no additions. There was an effort, I think, to try to do something about that, but it was difficult because there were some nations that felt that the major powers, in trying to control proliferation of nuclear weapons, were in fact putting themselves in a position of ascendancy by having nuclear weapons. They were sometimes reluctant to do anything that might inhibit their eventually acquiring nuclear weapons. I remember the Indians saying in these negotiations that they were there as a neutral, that they would never acquire nuclear weapons, but they wanted the right to do so. That's how a number of nations felt. It became a difficult problem, and it's still a problem today of course. But the emphasis now on non-proliferation is considerably greater than it was in those days.

Q: Was Israel a factor in those days, developing nuclear capabilities?

GEHRON: Not in those early days. It was clear that nations with a pretty strong scientific and technical background could probably develop nuclear weapons eventually. Israel was

certainly in that group, as was India, Pakistan, and China. They all had the potential and that was recognized.

Q: Was it around this time when China exploded its hydrogen or nuclear weapon? Was it on your watch?

GEHRON: No. I left the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency in 1966 and went into the European bureau (Bureau of European Affairs) at the State Department. John Leddy was then the assistant secretary.

From the arms control side, I went into the PA (Public Affairs) office in the European bureau.

Q: And you were there from '66 to ?

GEHRON: I hate to say it, to '83; I think that is when I left. It was an interesting time. I got sent on various delegations. In Geneva I acted as a spokesman for the delegation and played that same role in a number of other situations in the European bureau. We had the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. George Vest was then the guy who was leading that delegation and I acted as the go-between with the newsmen and our delegation. I played that role in some other negotiations.

Q: Let's progress on the European bureau up through the end of the Johnson administration. What sort of things were you involved with in public affairs?

GEHRON: That's a difficult question to answer because it's hard for me to recollect some of these things, to be perfectly honest with you. I was involved in a number of undertakings from the return of the crown of St. Stephen to the Hungarians to things involving Eastern Europe and Western Europe. It's difficult to give you a specific documented list of the various things we were involved with. I'm trying to think of something that might serve as an example of that. Of course, we were always involved in the various episodes in Berlin, which seemed to be constant in the days when I was first in that European bureau. I spent a lot of time with the German desk working out ways of explaining what was going on to the public and getting information from Berlin and getting information from our desk people as to what was happening and what we could say about it.

Q: How would you work this? You'd look and see what was the issue of the day, say on a typical day, and then bring it together and then take it to the spokesperson?

GEHRON: That's right. What we'd do is generally look at what was going on in the press and figure with those daily briefings the department conducts to this day, that we would be asked certain questions which would have to be answered. We would develop the responses with the specialists concerned. We would generally do that on our own. We were knowledgeable enough in most of these areas that we could write what we thought we should be saying and take them to the various offices concerned for their approval.

Then we would take that information down to the spokesman and brief him/her more fully.

I remember numerous meetings with Hodding Carter, when he was the assistant secretary for public affairs, sitting down and just throwing back and forth what might be said or what might follow from what we said in those sessions.

That really just reminds me it's a throwback to what I did what I was in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. When the president had a press conference, I would go over to the White House, with a number of other people as well, and meet with Pierre Salinger who was then Kennedy's spokesman. We'd kick around these questions and see where things would go from where we were taking it with a prepared statement and what might follow thereafter and what might be said in response to those questions. That is really the procedure. It started out for me in the arms control and disarmament days and continued through into the State Department days.

In the arms control days, we used Lincoln White as our spokesman, because he was the State Department spokesman. Although he acted as his own director, the agency itself was under the general jurisdiction of the Secretary of State, so we used state facilities for getting the word out.

Speaking of Linc White, if you recall, when the U-2, with Gary Powers aboard, was shot down, Lincoln White was the one who denied that had happened on the information that he received from higher ups, and then he subsequently found out that it was true, of course. I remember that almost daily thereafter when I'd go down to him with a piece of paper in my hand--this sounds like an exaggeration, but it's my recollection--you'd hand him something, and he'd say, "Okay, I see what I've got here, but is it true?" He was very concerned about what had happened to him in that Power's incident. It's a difficult role for a spokesman. Once you lose your credibility, you're pretty much out of there.

Q: You were working with George Vest in the Helsinki Accords time. Two days ago I was just talking to George about that and the pressure he was under there. While he was negotiating that, Henry Kissinger was trying to cut him off at the knees. I was wondering whether this translated itself to your job, too.

GEHRON: I personally was not, but I could sense that we were having problems. One of the things was we were really not getting instructions. I said instructions generally were very good, but in this particular instance, they were not. If you remember that situation, a lot of people felt that this was a cave-in to the communists and it wasn't going to go anywhere and we were going to get pretty badly beaten up in this thing. As it turned out, it turned out to be very successful.

Q: It turned out to be one of the keys that brought the Soviet Union down.

GEHRON: That's right. It really became a very, very successful operation. I must say I hand George Vest a lot of credit. He did hang in there. Even given the fact that there were

people back home who were trying to undercut him, he did stay in there and completed that job. I have vivid memories of it being signed in Helsinki with Gerald Ford and Brezhnev both in attendance. He did a marvelous job. He was a very, very good Foreign Service officer and a very, very nice person.

Q: During this whole period of time, what about dealing with the media? What was your impression?

GEHRON: It was very difficult. There were some people who were extremely knowledgeable. For example, The New York Times had a stringer in Geneva who really knew a great deal about arms control and disarmament. There was an AP (Associated Press) man in the State Department who could have been, I think, Secretary of State. His grasp of foreign affairs was that good. In fact there were a couple of them.

Then there was the guy who came into Geneva. He was on a European trip and asked to see a number of people. I took him around to them and I talked to him myself. He was there for about four hours and wrote his piece that night, I guess, because it was in The New York Times the next day. The thrust of it was that this was a wild goose chase, this arms control and disarmament effort. Actually, he was a good reporter but not in this instance. So you got all kinds.

I would say that while the media gets trashed a lot, I had a pretty good relationship with them but there are a few things I would have to call them on, from my perspective. I enjoyed that time, working with them. I found that they try to do a very complete and correct job.

Izzy Stone, for example, is a person who followed these arms control and disarmament negotiations, and he was a very knowledgeable person. He wrote a piece for The New Yorker. I remember, not only was it an excellent piece, but The New Yorker staff called me and raised some questions about some of the things that Izzy Stone had written, asking, "Is this correct?" They were really out there to do a good job.

Q: The New Yorker had a reputation of having teams of fact checkers.

GEHRON: Yes, right.

Q: Whereas The New York Times and The Washington Post, they'll slap it on the front page. They don't have time to check.

GEHRON: That's right and, of course, that's their man reporting from Geneva in the case of The New York Times I mentioned. If that's the way he saw the picture, then that's the way he saw the picture. I'd cite that piece, not as a single one, but just the one that comes to mind immediately; that piece was a subjective piece done by the reporter. That's the way he felt, I think. No matter how many people he talked to, that was his general feeling about it.

Q: Did you have problems with anyone during the Carter administration? Carter came in. He was going to do all sorts of things in the European area. You had things like the neutron bomb and the cancellation of the Olympics over Afghanistan, and other things. I would have felt this was a difficult time.

GEHRON: It was a very difficult time, quite frankly. Your mention of the neutron bomb had escaped my memory. It certainly was a tour de force in terms of public opinion and reaction. That was a battle that was fought not just for a few days but also for quite some period of time. It had a very negative effect, and yet it wasn't really that big an issue, as it turned out. It wasn't all that important in the scheme of things. But it was blown up to be that important. It did create some havoc, yes.

You're absolutely right about the Olympics. Some of the things that happened during the Carter administration did tend to undercut morale and really moving ahead on a grand scale. I suppose the final blows of that, was it Carter and our hostages in Iran? That seemed to be the final chain of undercutting of morale to a certain extent, and ending the feeling that we were really going to move ahead and do some big things. Of course, that was towards the end of his administration. I would say that yes, during the Carter administration, while at first it seemed that things were really going to take off and go, did not move that way.

Q: How did you find the European press, media in general?

GEHRON: Generally, I would say pretty good. The serious British papers were quite good. The Scandinavian papers covered their stories pretty well although they had their angles and would play up something that might not be a major issue but was an issue for them. Disarmament, of course, played well in the European area. You'd get a play in Japan, and you'd get a play in Russia. Of course the Russian and Eastern European press was terrible. We had a correspondent in the State Department from Israel who was very hawkish. Generally, I would say they covered their stories pretty well. I must say that I think the people that were designated to take on that State job, much like the people who are designated to take on the White House press reporting job, are very high caliber people. I can't speak about today because I don't really know any of those people now, but in the days that I was there, I was very impressed by the level of competency of most of the reporters there.

Q: How about Congress? Did you find that you had to deal with Congress? Was this a problem or not?

GEHRON: Congress was a problem. Let me put it on this basis. In my days in the arms control and disarmament area, it was a very definite problem. There were a great many more skeptics than there were promoters of this idea. The big promoter of this idea was Hubert Humphrey who was a big arms control man. I suppose if he had ever won the presidency, it would have been probably an even more dramatic world in the arms control and disarmament area. On the European bureau's side, there were always problems with Congress. The problem with the bureau was that they never really had, in my day,

anybody representing them. There was no congressional liaison person in the Bureau of European Affairs. The person who would normally do that job was the assistant secretary. He's got to take time off and go up there to explain a program or a policy or whatever. So, I think, the bureau and the State Department, generally, even though they had an office of congressional affairs, I think they've always done a very poor job on the hill. I think we could do a much better job. I think that's probably being improved today, although I can't speak to that with any authority.

Q: How did you manage to stay from '66 to '83? Were you Civil Service or what?

GEHRON: No. Let me tell you that story, because I think it deserves to be told. When I came down to Washington, I joined the White House disarmament staff as a political appointee. When I moved over to state, I was in that same position and later turned into a Foreign Service reserve officer. In 1964 I was serving as that political person when I first went over to state. To give me some kind of a more normal position, I came in the back door as a Foreign Service reserve officer. I didn't take the Foreign Service exam, but I did commit and stay in the Foreign Service in that capacity. I just might add that currently, now that I'm out but still working part time, I'm now a civil servant.
(Laughing)

Q: Did you have a feeling that the European bureau, as a bureau was pretty well prepared for dealing with the press as opposed to some of the other geographic bureaus?

GEHRON: When I was there, I think the bureau itself, and maybe every bureau feels this way, thought that they were the premier bureau in the department. Indeed, being a part of that group, I felt the same way. Whether that was true or not, I don't know. I think the European bureau did have a very good reputation itself. I frankly feel that the various assistant secretaries who have served there certainly were top men. Many of the office directors and others were very, very capable. Looking back on that time, it was a pretty rough time. The Soviet Union was giving the world and the U.S. a very difficult time. When I look back on that and think of the various emergencies and crises that came up and had to be faced, I think the European bureau came through with flying colors. I can remember crises when I was there myself until 11:00 or 12:00 at night. Just Berlin. It was important that you were there when you were needed. I was very impressed by the bureau's operation.

Q: How did the Reagan administration do? You weren't there very long during the Reagan administration, but did they come charging in and then go off in all different directions? What was your impression?

GEHRON: That's a very interesting expression that you should use, "charging in." Yes, I felt they came charging in, and that is what sent me charging out. I thought that this was a group of younger people with new blood and new ideas and I'd be looked upon as something of an old fogey. I thought that this was maybe the time for me to get out. So out I went. But I must say that I don't know really what happened to the bureau or how successful it was after that time. But up to that time, as I say, it was really an interesting

place to have served.

Q: You left when, in '83?

GEHRON: '83.

Q: What did you do then?

GEHRON: I went off for a couple of months and then came back to do this freedom of information work. I do both political-military matters, and all aspects of the EUR bureau (Bureau of European Affairs) itself. You have to have a commission, so to speak, from the bureau in writing to act as a reviewer for any particular area. I gained my spurs being one for both the EUR bureau and the PM (Political Military) bureau. I've been doing that kind of work since then, and I have found it quite fascinating. You get into not only historical documentation that you review, but things that are right up to date, as recent as 1998, or '99. You still feel you're right in the thick of things. It's been a very interesting undertaking and I've enjoyed it very much. The other side of the coin is that you have some time off. We are retired and don't work full time. We work maybe three or four days a week and have some time off which is very nice.

Q: Do you have any feel for the thrust of information requests from the public, from the press, and what you're looking for? Where are the major issues?

GEHRON: That's an interesting question. When I first started working in this area, and that was very early on in the freedom of information operation, the major number of requests came from academics, people who were maybe writing a book, or needed the information for a course, or had a special interest in something that they were looking into from a serious point of view.

I would say that's gradually shifted now. What has happened is the working press is beginning to find that this is quite a source of information. One of the things for example that we've run into are newsmen who are pursuing a certain subject and will ask for specific documentation on the subject that they are covering. For example, just recently Frontline, the PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) program, was doing something on corruption in Russia. They asked for what we had on corruption in Russia. Here you go. There's quite a bit of reporting on that subject out of Moscow. This is a source of information for them that's really quite unusual and unique.

That said, there's another aspect to this. I'm not sure I'm being fair to the requestor. There are a number of British newsmen who have begun to use our freedom of information for requests of their own, because there is a British freedom of information bill going through the British Parliament at the present time. They would like this to be as good a bill as they can possibly get. They are showing, by making requests of the U.S. government, how open it is and suggesting that maybe the British government should be as open in its efforts. It's turning into a situation where the press now seem to be almost more dominant than the academics.

Q: That's interesting.

GEHRON: This is not to say that we're not still getting requests from academics or people who are just interested in the subject and want to see things about it. There's another thing that should be pointed out here. Now, when this information is released, and I would say that of the documents we review, this is a guesstimate on my part, but I'd say that maybe 90 percent of those reviewed are released publicly. When they are released, they are put on the net and there's a website. So these things are available almost literally to anybody around the world.

Q: Do you have a feeling that there's now a lot of communications, that people are calling and traveling more? In other words, that less is getting put on paper and more is getting done over the phone?

GEHRON: Well, I think that's probably true. One of the big problems is that you now have great use of e-mail. Of course, that's the written word, but it's a different form of communication, a very informal one. That kind of thing is being used quite a bit, but telegrams are still telegrams, I mean, you know, the form is still there. Position papers and what have you. It's not going to change, at least in the foreseeable future. There's a lot of paper still out there, and it's our job when the request comes in to review that stuff. As I say, it's very fascinating, because you pick up a lot of interesting tidbits of information as you go through these things, and you get into some very interesting areas.

Q: This might be a good place to stop. All right?

GEHRON: Sure.

End of interview