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The University of Baltimore is launching a two-year investigation called "Baltimore'68: Riots and Rebirth," a project centered around the events that followed the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and their effects on the development of our city. UB administration and faculty members in the law school and in the undergraduate departments of history and community studies are planning a series of projects and events to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this pivotal event. We are currently working with the Reginald F. Lewis Museum of Maryland African American History, The Jewish Museum of Maryland, Maryland Public Television and the Enoch Pratt Free Libraries to pursue funding for projects that may include conferences, a website and a library traveling exhibit.

Your potential participation in an oral history project would contribute to the very foundation of this project – the memories of Baltimoreans who lived through the riots and saw the changes that came about in response to them. Your life story can fill in the limited knowledge we learn from newspaper accounts and the television footage.

If you choose to participate in the project you would be interviewed by students from the University of Baltimore. They will ask you questions, but your memories will determine the direction of the interviews.

If you agree to serve as an oral history informant in this project, you will meet with a team of undergraduate students. The students will take a still photograph of you. In addition, if you have a photo of yourself in or around 1968, we would greatly appreciate it if we could borrow it, scan it, and return it. We would reserve the rights to reproduce those photos and use them on the website, conferences, exhibit or publications.

The students may conduct the interviews at a location of your choice, or you may meet them at the University of Baltimore Langsdale Library for your interviews. During the interviews, your recollections will be recorded in two forms: audio and video. The students will be responsible for operating the equipment. You can expect the interviews to last for a minimum of 30 minutes each.

Sometimes talking about events that occurred decades ago will unearth forgotten memories. Undoubtedly, some of those remembrances will be negative. We greatly appreciate your willingness to take the risk of exploring a potentially painful past so that your life experiences will be recorded.

After the interviews the students will transcribe your oral history. They will provide you with a copy of the transcription for your review before the transcription is published. The transcription, video and audio records will be archived in the Langsdale Library Special Collections and will be accessible to the public. Your name will be attached to these documents. The University of Baltimore may use your image and/or your words in any future documentaries, exhibits, conferences or publications. Participants in the oral history project agree to waive their confidentiality.

If at any time you are uncomfortable with participation in the study, you are free to drop out. Participation is strictly voluntary. While your participation is requested and highly valued, you are free to decide whether or not to continue participation at all times. You may decline to have your name published with your reminiscences

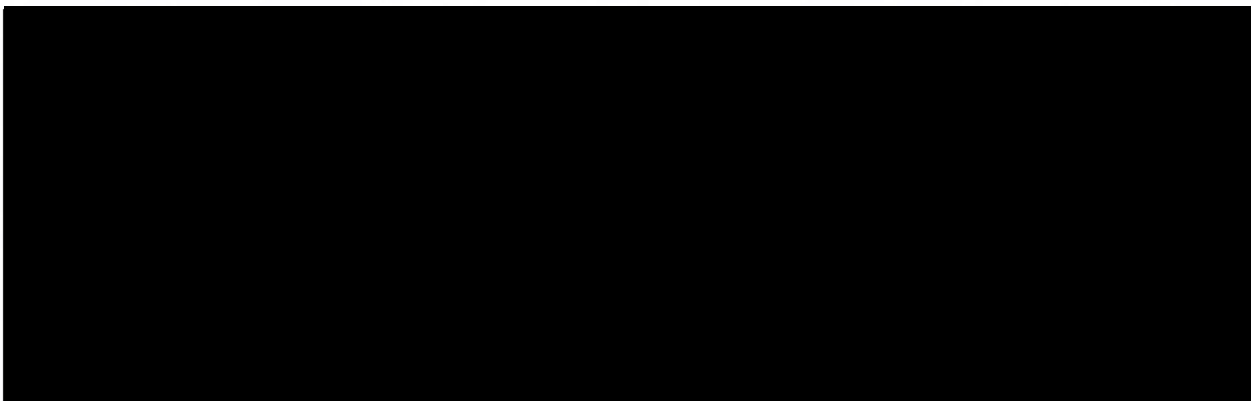
If you have any questions about this project, please feel free to contact me at 410-837-5296. Thank you for your participation.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth M. Nix, Ph.D.  
Visiting Assistant Professor  
History and Community Studies  
The University of Baltimore

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I have read and understand the information provided above, and consent to participate in the study. I have also been given a copy of the informed consent for my records.



Interviewee: Art Cohen

Interviewer: Nyasha Chikowore

July 2007, Baltimore, MD - *final, corrected version (March 14, 2008)*

**Nyasha:** Can you state your full name

**Art Cohen:** My name is Art Cohen.

**Nyasha:** In the 1960's what was your situation.

**Art Cohen:** I graduated law school in 1963, went to Washington, D.C. and worked for four years for the federal government at the National Institute of Mental Health. Then toward the end of that period I became licensed to practice law in Maryland and I wanted to become part of the anti-poverty program, the Legal Aid program. There was only one in Maryland at that time and it was in Baltimore. So I came up here and began as a Legal Aid lawyer in September of 1967.

**Nyasha:** And where were you working?

**Art Cohen:** I was working in Legal Aid East, which was ... what happened was the downtown Legal Aid Bureau and under the anti-poverty program or it may have even been a little before that, they set up two satellite offices. One in West Baltimore on Pennsylvania and Laurens Street and one in East Baltimore at the corner of Aisquith, Gay and Monument Street. I went to the Legal Aid East office, that's where I was working.

**Nyasha:** If you don't mind me asking, how old were you?

**Art Cohen:** Let's see, this was 1967 so I was just thirty.

**Nyasha:** Where did you live, what neighborhood?

**Art Cohen:** Well I actually lived in East Baltimore. I would often walk to work. I lived on

Broadway, north of Hopkins Hospital around Broadway and Federal Street up near North Avenue.

**Nyasha:** Do you remember where you used to shop, like for groceries?

**Art Cohen:** I did have a car so I could drive different places. I don't really remember doing a lot of shopping actually. We used to eat out a lot, it was a very, very busy time. I was new to town and I got invited places but often things were on the run. We were working not only during the daytime but at night, it was a busy time.

**Nyasha:** Before the riots do you remember what kinds of interactions you had with people of other races?

**Art Cohen:** I would say that basically we were all colleagues. You had in the anti-poverty program you had community action agency which was under Parren Mitchell at the time, who later became a Congressman.

**Nyasha:** Parren?

**Art Cohen:** Parren Mitchell.

**Nyasha:** How do you spell that first name?

**Art Cohen:** P - A - R - R - E - N - he just died a few weeks ago actually, couple months ago. Parren Mitchell was the head of the community action agency which was our anti - poverty agency. He had a guy named Stan Mazer who was his second in command. Richard Bateman also who was in that with him. They had these community action neighborhood offices all around East and West Baltimore particularly. Probably other places as well in South Baltimore too. I don't know the extent of all their offices. As Legal Aid lawyers we worked very closely

with people working those offices who were doing social work and community organizing and that sort of thing. We often worked with them on cases. For instance they would find a case and find a situation in public housing where somebody was just put out on the street or even evicted from their own home. So there were housing cases, there were cases involving school - Legal Aid offered a wide range of legal assistance. Welfare cases, people being denied welfare or that sort of thing. So we worked very closely with people in the community action agency, the majority of whom tended to be African American, and among Legal Aid lawyers the majority tended to be white. We worked as a team and we worked very, very closely.

**Nyasha:** Did you have any social interaction...

**Art Cohen:** Oh, yes, there were parties all the time. People needed to sort of blow off steam. Somebody would set up something at their house, people would come late and stay late. It was a lot of dancing, people just socialized pretty much. I was living there so I probably socialized more than a number of my other Legal Aid colleagues but all of us socialized. There was administrative staff as well as lawyers and they were of both races, predominately either white or African American and there were others too but these were the major two races.

**Nyasha:** How would you describe the racial mood in Baltimore before the riots?

**Art Cohen:** Well, you know, it's hard - I'll give you a description the best I can but remember I came just seven or eight months before, I had not been in Baltimore. So it was new to me.

**Nyasha:** And you were coming from...

**Art Cohen:** Washington, D.C. and before that up in New England. I had not lived in Baltimore before. Years ago when I was a kid I lived in Silver Spring, Maryland. Many, many years before but for two or three years Silver Spring - Chevy Chase. We visited Baltimore from time to time but just for a day. I really didn't know Baltimore. Even when I was living in Washington, D.C.

the four years before that I would come up for a visit but I usually wouldn't stay overnight. There obviously had been a lot of racial conflicts in Baltimore. Baltimore had gone through a lot of these - the Gwynn Oak Park situation which I heard about. I heard about a lot of these things second hand. They had already happened by the time I got here. I would say, it's fair to say there was still a lot of conflict around. Most of it was around income as well as race. In other words the inner city of Baltimore tended to be African American and tended to be lower income. It was like a circle in the middle of a doughnut who knew how privileged people were as you moved further north and east and west around the city and then out into Baltimore County. They knew that people had a lot more than they had. This was a source of some conflict and put it this way, tension. What's interesting too is that the National Commissions on Civil Disorders under Governor Otto Kerner from Illinois in the wake of Detroit and Newark exploding in previous years 1967 and then Watts in 1965. There had been this commission and it came out with its' report in March just before King was assassinated. That report sounded a very loud warning saying that what had happened in these cities was likely to happen in other places if some very great changes weren't made. Then to have this followed on April fourth by the killing of Martin Luther King was just, that set everybody off. Obviously not just in Baltimore but all around the country . There was a lot of tension . Whatever happened in Baltimore as a result of King's death didn't come from nowhere. It had been brewing there. There's no question about that. We could see in the court system the situation for blacks. I'd rather use the word "black" because at that time it was all white and black, I mean that's the way they said it in the city. For black folks at that time in the courts; we only had to go and visit the jails and the prisons: There were more people of the African American race there than white. Was this because somehow they were worse? We didn't think so. We thought that the way the system was set up was to their great disadvantage. So, there was a seething discontent about this, and as Legal Aid lawyers we tended to identify with the situation of these folks. We wouldn't have been Legal Aid lawyers for very long if we didn't.

**Nyasha:** Do you remember how you heard about Dr. King being assassinated?

**Art Cohen:** I sure do. That's one of those days in one's life though it was forty years ago that one never forgets. In addition to my Legal Aid work I had tried to start a kind of youth club, of all things, in East Baltimore. I had a group of young guys from East Baltimore and this was before the real heavy drugs had really hit. So the atmosphere in East Baltimore was much friendlier, and much less dangerous than I would say it became later on. Young black kids in the neighborhood - I'm trying to think how I got to know them. I probably got to know them through my clients in Legal Aid and these were their kids. I went around to each client who might have a son that was interested in this. I said this is what I'm doing, are you interested in having your son be a part of this? So I cleared it with all the parents and I had a small group. It became pretty clear, by the time King was shot in early April - the group had been going about a month or two - Whatever my ambition had been for the group it soon became - "Mr. Art will you drive us to the bowling alley here. Mr. Art can we go there to visit." I basically chaperoned them around to places and that's fine. That's what met their needs, the point was to have some fun and just do something a little different. The night that King was shot I was out with that group. In fact I think we were at the bowling alley so we didn't know what had happened. I got home at nine o'clock, he had been shot around seven or seven - thirty. I turned on the television and there it was. You could see a... from then on in East Baltimore a quiet . It was not a quiet of calm quiet, it was a quiet of the calm before the storm. You just had the feeling that something was going to erupt but you didn't know when. I wasn't part of it because I was kind of an outsider but I was sure that people were talking and planning and commiserating and tearing their hair and figuring what can we do. It took, as I remember my experience, it took two days in Baltimore. Saturday afternoon, he was killed on a Thursday, Saturday afternoon was when things began to erupt all over the city .

**Nyasha:** How did you hear about the riots starting?

**Art Cohen:** I don't use the word riot because I don't see it that way. The word that the Kerner Commission uses is civil disorder or civil disturbance . Some people say insurrection, people use all kinds of different words. Riot is a negative word and that's the reason I don't use it . I felt at



that point people had such grief and sense of loss and anger that they had to express it somehow. Baltimore could have been a lot worse than it was. There was fourteen million dollars worth of damage, there were six people killed but there thousands of people jailed on curfew violations and that sort of thing. There were thousands of people involved in what happened, it could have been a lot worse. Detroit was worse, Watts was worse, I believe, in terms of people. And Newark was worse. But it was bad enough, it was pretty upsetting to a lot of people. Let's back up, repeat your question.

**Nyasha:** How did you hear about the riots?

**Art Cohen:** I heard about it by turning on the television on Thursday night. Then of course it was on everybody's lips .

**Nyasha:** The riot in Baltimore or riots elsewhere?

**Art, Cohen:** Oh, oh I'm sorry. You're asking about the disturbances. No that was different . What I heard was the next day somebody who was friendly to our office came and said - "You need to put black cloth or something on the outside of your office . And if any of you live in or near the inner city, you need to put it on your house as well. To signal to people that you are in sympathy about his death, his assassination." That was a signal of some sort. It was thought that it was just a question of time . What happened to me was that on Saturday afternoon I went west to Union Square to a memorial service for Dr. King. It was a very quiet service. There was not a lot of people there but there were enough to make it a service. When the service was over I was coming back east across Orleans Street to Central Avenue in East Baltimore. I looked up the street and there was fire . There were a number of young people. They were apparently watching the fire. There were police cars around, it was obvious that something physical had started. That was my first awareness of that, probably mid afternoon on Saturday April sixth

**Nyasha:** How did you feel when you saw that?

**Art Cohen:** That's a difficult question. I felt obviously very concerned. (PAUSE) Can we stop this for a moment...

**Art Cohen:** You asked how I felt and the reason I say it's a difficult question is because it was quite a series of moments that happened right after that. First of all I had gone around in previous months taking photographs of people who were willing to be photographed in East Baltimore, just as part of a catching life there. And I had my camera with me on that afternoon when I went over to the memorial service. I went with my camera, a little thirty-five millimeter camera. I decided not to use it out of respect for the occasion, it just didn't seem right to use the camera. However when I was coming back east across Orleans Street to Central, I looked up and saw this happening. I wasn't even thinking, I just brought the camera up to my eye and I snapped three pictures. As I snapped those pictures, this group of youth turned and came toward me very quickly. And they were probably one hundred, one hundred and fifty yards away but it was a quick movement. It was hard to estimate but I would say it was some distance. In the front of them there was an older youth and as he came up to my car he said - "Put that camera away!" And I was so caught unaware - "why?", I said "I'm a friend, I work at Legal Aid, I live here ." I obviously did not understand the moment so I was caught completely surprised. He said "Put that camera away". So that was it, I wasn't going to argue, I put it down. I got back into my car, I just stood by my car or stuck it outside the window of the car. The car window was open on the driver's side, I went to turn and felt this explosion on the side of my face. And I thought... damn, I probably had been shot. What a stupid thing, I realized I had not gauged the situation properly. They didn't know who I was, I could have been a police informant, I could have been anybody out to record their faces - they didn't know, this was my mistake. So I'm driving up Monument Street to rush to the emergency room at Hopkins with blood coming down, it was really hurting, and a bunch of kids are on the back of a truck going down the other way - and they see me and they point, they laugh. I go into the emergency room, when I get into the emergency room people are beginning to come in from the neighborhood. Black folks are

beginning to come in from the neighborhood as well. But I come in and they look at me and I say "what happened?", they say "we don't know what happened," and I say "well I want to know if I'm shot or not," they say "we can't tell, it doesn't look like you are but we can't be sure." I said "well, listen I want to get an x-ray or something to determine."

So they took me upstairs to get x-rayed and they said "based on the x-rays we don't see any kind of bullet or anything, you just got hit with something." So I went downstairs discharged with stitches, told to come back in five days to get my stitches removed. That night I had set up with the community workers to have a party at my place. This is before King had been killed, it had been set up for about a week. Now I wasn't going back to my place, I wasn't comfortable doing that. So I just drove right out up Broadway and out Harford Road to Hamilton area, parked the car - to sort of get my wits about me- by now it's five o'clock - the National Guard and those people are beginning to be brought in and so on. I get out there and am about to get out of the car and I look down and I see something shiny. I pull this thing out from behind the passenger seat - it's the rusty lower half of a golf club - they had thrown it in like this to the window. And I thought - it was almost comical that that's what I was hit with in East Baltimore, a golf club. I realize how lucky I was because if it had gone just a fraction of an inch one way I could have been blinded. If it had gone a fraction of an inch the other way I could have been killed from the impact but it hit right on my bone here. It hurt like hell but it wasn't a serious injury. Anyway I called my friend, some friends who I was going to have for the party. We went back to my place, got all the liquor and everything that we were going to have and went to somebody else's house across North Avenue in a "safer zone". We had this party and of course people there was nothing else on their lips all night except what happened to King. What had happened to me was kind of minor. What happened to King and the loss and what was coming next - I fell asleep there at eleven o'clock on the couch. I was waked up by a phone call at seven in the morning which was somebody who knew me over in Charles Village and said "we were looking for you, why don't you come over here and have breakfast?" So I went over there and had breakfast. Then we started up at Legal Aid and for the next five or six days we spent something like ten, fifteen hours a day in the courts and at Legal Aid. Mostly defending curfew cases because most of the

cases of people who were arrested during that time were arrested for violation of curfew. Now Gov. Agnew has just gotten these powers the week before, a couple of weeks before, and he used them with a vengeance. On I believe it was Sunday night, it could have been Monday night - Sunday the seventh, on Monday the eighth - he declared a curfew at seven o'clock.

If that had been the curfew the night I had fallen asleep on the couch, so it was lucky I did because if I had gone out I might've just have been picked off the street by one of the patrols. Anyway people had been told there was a curfew at seven o'clock and a lot of people were out on their stoops. They didn't want to be cooped up inside, they were outside sitting on their stoops as people do in Baltimore. Then Agnew got the idea to move the curfew from seven to six and then from six to four. So thousands of people either didn't understand what a curfew was or hadn't heard about the change of time and they were arrested right on their door steps and taken into prison. So we had a lot of those cases to deal with, they weren't the only kinds of cases, we had some petty looting and that sort of stuff, but that was the main kind of case that we had there, four thousand people were charged with curfew violation. Unlike D.C. nearby D.C. didn't try their cases, they just held people. If people could post bond then they could get out. Baltimore tried all their cases in the next week pretty much, all the curfew cases. They were able to dispose of them and in most cases people were released. So another question... You can see that was a way to start this thing. I mean the first day I went to court which was that Sunday after the party I was hurting all day and it really affected my work. It made me angrier too. I felt pretty stupid because I thought I had brought this on myself, I really did. I did not blame these kids for doing what they did. They saw me as an intruder and they were trying to get me away. But I was in a lot of pain and I didn't put up with much in the courtroom and the police would bring people in. They were coming in, this was one of the busiest courts - Eastern District here in Baltimore - and in one case they had a young man they had no charge for him - they were just holding him, on nothing. So I challenged this and I pleaded with the judge. It took about an hour and a half and finally the judge said "let him go because you've got nothing to hold him on." But everybody was scared, the judges were scared, the police were scared. I suppose the lawyers were scared and of course the people who were arrested were scared and their families were. It

was a very tense difficult time. I wouldn't trade it for anything the opportunity in having been a Legal Aid lawyer at that time. I ended up staying a year and a half in Legal Aid. But particularly because of the death of King and what happened in the aftermath it seemed like five years because so much happened as a result of that. More questions.

**Nyasha:** We did interview a lawyer before who was working in those cases and I asked - Do you remember speaking to some of the people who were detained. Did you hear anything that they were saying about the civil unrest?

**Art Cohen:** Well I got to tell you, I don't know who that lawyer was or what kind of cases they had. There were only forty of us lawyers, half of us were Legal Aid lawyers and the other half were young from big private law firms, many of whom had never been to court before. So we had to train them in how to be in court . I don't remember a lot of time for this. I do know that my landlord who was black came through. My barber from the shop at Oliver Street and Broadway came through and I got the chance to sort of see them. And they saw me doing what I was doing and we were able to get my landlord released. There was no business for him to be there, he just was swept up off the street like everybody else. It was panic time on the part of the National Guard and some of the other folks, and the Fort Bragg soldiers who came in - the U.S. Army. I think they had both National Guard and U.S. Army in Baltimore at the time. So I didn't get a lot of chance to talk with people but I could tell how upset people were. My job was mainly to get them out of there - to give them a defense and get them out of there. So that's my answer to that, the people that I had a chance to talk to about that were the people - the community action workers the night before at that party. That's why we had a good chance to talk about what people were feeling and the anger and the mixture of feelings. Really the fear, the anger, the grief and wanting to somehow strike out. Feeling like this was the last straw: To lose a leader like King who had tried to reach across the races to include everybody - was just too much for people to bear. It was like we can't even have a man like King who was internationally recognized, nationally recognized and non violent as our leader without him being taken from us. There was a lot of that kind of anger, I heard it.

**Nyasha:** For most of the information you got during the time of civil unrest was when you were in court, or did you get information from somewhere else - TV, radio...

**Art Cohen:** By the time we got home which is often two or three in the morning there was no point of even watching television and I didn't get much of a chance to read the papers either. We were just - I'll tell you the first two or three days - I didn't even get home to change my underwear, that's how busy we were. Finally I went home two or three days after all this started got a change of everything and so on.

We weren't even living in our home. I was staying in ... actually there's a woman in our Legal Aid agency who had an apartment downtown and she turned it over to myself and another lawyer during that time, so that we didn't, so we could just stay there and stay within the zone and not have to cross back and forth. I moved some of my clothes and stuff down there and that's where I stayed for pretty much I don't know how many days but probably a week, several days. My memories of that period are more of doing our job at Legal Aid - in various courts with various kinds of atmospheres in the courts, some of them were friendlier than others - than they are of hearing from people, though I did hear from people later on and I'll be glad to tell you about that when the week was over. But during that week, week and a half in Baltimore when we were functioning as lawyers there wasn't a lot of time to do much else. We did get together toward the end of the week to draw up an amnesty proclamation for the people who were arrested on curfew violations and to take it to Gov. Agnew. And I'll fill you in on what happened to that because that's a story. But during that week I was just so busy working in court. I had a hundred cases that week and that's true of most of the other lawyers too. So that will keep you busy. You have to go, you have to interview people. I came up with a sheet that we could use to get basic information - circumstances, address, name, how they were arrested, and so on and so forth. We needed that kind of stuff, these hundreds of people coming in at a very fast clip and you had to be able to kind of get the basic information from everybody in order to even begin to care of their case.

**Nyasha:** I guess that week you weren't going out that much. So you didn't get a chance to see the neighborhoods.

**Art Cohen:** No I really didn't. I was in one court after another. I was in the central district court downtown for several nights. That one was open later than the others, it was open until two, three in the morning. I was in the eastern district, I was in the southeastern district. So I think I was in about three or four of the courts. There's something like six or seven courts - six courts around the, I believe around the central courts. I was in just under half of them during that week. One time we had a situation where I got to the southeastern district which is right near - it handles the Highlandtown area in southeast Baltimore - a whole busload of black steelworkers going to work were stopped and herded off the bus because they were going at six o'clock to get in there on time.

Technically the curfew had not ended. So they were taken off the bus because it was a "what are you doing out at this time?" kind of thing. So I get to court and here's this prosecutor, one by one, lecturing each of these men. Gradually they were all late to work, they should have never been taken off that bus. They should have been allowed to get to Sparrows Point to do their job. They had nothing to do with what was happening. So there was a lot of that kind of crap going on. As lawyers we have to try and dispose of that. So that prosecutor - he had been "the bad guy" the day before - so now he wanted to be the good guy. He would lecture these guys like he was paternalistic - he was sort of talking down to them and saying - they didn't need that, they were perfectly within the law. They were just going to work but that's the kind of absurd stuff we had happening because of feelings that were running so high.

**Nyasha:** Were the National Guard present in the court?

**Art Cohen:** No I don't remember that, I don't think so. Police were present, there were plenty of police present. If they were I don't remember them, they were on the streets.

**Nyasha:** Do you remember seeing...

**Art Cohen:** Oh yeah, on North Avenue particularly which was kind of a dividing line. Anything south of North Avenue - I'm talking about East Baltimore, West Baltimore - was more complicated because the area that was being guarded and patrolled went up to the northwest and through Park Heights. So it went beyond North Avenue it went further north. But I didn't get over to West Baltimore, everything I did was in East Baltimore. To get a complete picture you probably should interview a lawyer from West Baltimore. Anyway go ahead any other questions.

**Nyasha:** How did their presence make you feel?

**Art Cohen:** I don't know, I think I felt that bringing in these kinds of troops may have been an overreaction. But it was an overreaction that went on all over the country and shouldn't have surprised me because of the fear that was around, particularly in the white community, about what this meant. I found later on that there were a number of white people who actually did empathize with the blacks about their feelings about King's death and the anger and so on or came to understand it. There were others who just, you know, it just fed their prejudice and they might not have thought that much of King in the first place.

Any white person who felt something about Martin Luther King, and there were many, must have also felt a sense of loss. What they didn't see going on in many cases unless they were also low income like in southwest Baltimore or whatever, what they didn't see was all these other injustices that went along with it. This was like sort of the straw that broke the camel's back, this was too much. What 's interesting of course is these things didn't take place that long. They took place over a period of a few days. Whether they would have taken place longer if the National Guard had been there or not been there I don't know. I'm not so sure they would have. These kinds of explosions have their own natural history and people have to sort of get it out,



express it and then they are ready to move on. As upsetting as all this was and as destructive as it was to property and as much fear as it caused, it probably also served a useful and necessary purpose for the people who were involved. It was their way of screaming protest about the loss of somebody like Martin Luther King.

I had an interesting thing happen in the same southeast district, there was a young prosecutor who was there - the same one who had lectured the steelworkers - and he heard somewhere in the afternoon that his uncle's store, he was a white Jewish guy, that his uncle's store had been looted in northwest Baltimore. Well he lost it, he really wanted to stick it to somebody. Sure enough, we get four young black men caught in a car going through Highlandtown where the clothes were hanging out of the back trunk like they had just been looted or something. They were stopped, they were brought in. He wanted to charge them each with grand larceny . Grand larceny is stealing. Technically, he could have, because you steal anything worth over one hundred dollars it's grand larceny. It's not robbery, it's thievery of something worth more than one hundred dollars. They could have gotten up to fifteen years apiece for that . So here I am the only lawyer there and this guy is just waiting to taste blood. I said "I'm going to ask for a continuance, I'm going to ask for a postponement" because I just don't feel like - I went and interviewed these guys and they're all excited and they might have even been on something, I don't know. But they were not in a condition where they could assist in their own defense. Even if they had been, there were four of them, there was one of me and there was this charged atmosphere so I was going to ask the judge for a delay. And I did, and this young prosecutor opposed it, and the judge granted the delay.

We had this taken care of three weeks later, away from the stress of that period. I brought in some other lawyers, African-American lawyers from the community who came in and they took care of it. This prosecutor was taken off the case. So it was a good move because if I had tried to say I'm going to run to the rescue here and do this, they might have ended up in jail. He said "I'll reduce this if you try this case now, I'll reduce it to petty larceny which is less than a hundred dollars." They still could be put into jail for up to a year on that, that's a long time. Anyway that

had a good outcome, but he wouldn't speak to me for the rest of the time. Not that I cared but the prosecutor was so angry. He was feeling vengeance himself because of the fact his uncle's store had been looted. I understand that, but it has no place in court. If he's an officer of the court and he's there to do - I mean he's human - but if he felt that badly he should have just taken himself off all this stuff instead of trying to stick it to somebody. Anyway, go ahead: some more questions.

**Nyasha:** Obviously your life changed during the riots because you weren't at home, you were working most of the day, was there anything else that was different?

**Art Cohen:** It was a lonely time because I felt that black associates who I worked with were less interested in communicating with well-meaning whites who had been working with them, like me. They needed to work some things through themselves and they had their own feelings about what had happened and what went on. Understandably it may have been different from mine or any other white person for that matter. I think, as I said, this is something that had been building, and most of my associates had grown up in Baltimore. I was new to Baltimore, that's another factor. So I felt this moving away on the part of my black friends and associates. They sort of pulled back during that time. I think I understood why it was happening. I didn't like it, but there was nothing I could do about it. I had to accept it. Because the reason I didn't like it was because I felt pretty alone. Because out of the white community anybody who hadn't been involved in this kind of work, their perception of this was just so different than mine was because I was right in the middle of it. I found that there was a wall coming up between me and my fellow whites and there was a pulling back between me and my black friends and associates. So I just had to like it, lump it - I had to be willing to put up with that and I wasn't alone. There were others in similar situations who were white social workers or lawyers who had been working in the inner city during that time. They experienced pretty much the same thing. That moving away took about two months before people started coming back and they did come back. I must say that it was a ... I learned, above all I learned that, when I came to town I had had a kind of upper middle income white upbringing, liberal, which the idea was you were color blind

to people - race didn't matter. In a real sense race doesn't matter but color blind can also be an insult to people, because you're not realizing the culture that they are bringing with them and the experience and the history that they are bringing with them if you are looking at a person of other races. You need to understand that if you would do it for somebody ethnically, you should do it for somebody racially. You need to know where people came from and what they're feeling. One of the biggest lessons for me during this period was to learn that color blindness was not appreciated and didn't have much of a place. All it meant was that I was untested and untried and pretty unaware. So, this period of moving away helped make me much more aware. First of all I had to be aware that people who I had known and had been friendly with and worked with who were black needed to be away from me and people like me to work through this stuff, among their own friends and colleagues . As I said if there had been just a moving away and that was the end of it, it would be very sad. But that's not what happened. What happened was after about two months - that had to play itself out - we started coming back together and we picked up where we had been before, but on a stronger basis. Because they had worked through their business, I had worked through mine, and I had come to have an understanding that I didn't have when I first came to Baltimore. I was pretty naive about these things. Which goes to show, you can still be reasonably effective within limits in your profession and be naive. But that's not the same as having the level of understanding that you come to have later on. You're much more useful then, because you're aware of people much more fully, you know. You're not just some well-meaning liberal who wants to treat everybody the same. Well that's a very noble sentiment but it doesn't take you all that far and people distrust it. And sometimes they should. Because there are a lot of people who come with those attitudes, who when they are confronted, become quite different in their feelings. It was quite a time and I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to be part of that really. It was really a privilege to be a part of that, it was. It wasn't pleasant all the time but it was a privilege because I was able to experience something of what other people have had to put up with on a daily basis. Anyway go on with your questions.

**Nyasha:** What happened for you after that big week, after the riots?

**Art Cohen:** After the riots or after the disturbances. Well I never went back to my house. I was put up by a fellow Legal Aid lawyer for about a month. Then I moved to Charles Village.

**Nyasha:** Why didn't you go back?

**Art Cohen:** I didn't feel appropriate in that situation anymore. I probably wasn't appropriate to begin with because I was one of two white people in my area. One was an old man who had just lived there all his life and he was living out his life and that was it, and then there was me. Coming in from Washington, D.C. out of nowhere but I just no longer felt - I guess it's hard to describe. I guess I felt that I was no longer comfortable and no longer welcome in a way, because people had had a strong, I had seen this anger, and I didn't feel like what was it going to add for me to go back to where I was. My landlord was very nice about it, there was no problem with him. The house was a nice house - the other thing is and I guess I should add this - I was married and my wife and I separated about two months after we got to Baltimore. At the end of October she left and I was alone in this big house anyway. It was a three-storey house on Broadway so I made a darkroom in there for my photographs and stuff. It was pretty big for one person and I ended up going into an apartment in Charles Village. I do think one of the reasons was I had seen close up the anger and I guess maybe I felt some fear myself, maybe I felt that I wasn't welcome, maybe I had never been welcome but I was too stupid to know it beforehand. Once I went through this experience I could see this, in fact I was one of the only Legal Aid lawyers who was white who was living in East or West Baltimore. I wasn't the only one but one of the only ones. Then I continued with the agency until January of '69, so that was eight or nine months later. There's a lot of things that happened during that period. Walter Carter who is Jill Carter's father, Jill Carter just ran unsuccessfully for Mayor here in Baltimore, her father - she is one of several daughters - her father was alive at that time in the middle of civil rights things. George Wallace came to town in the fall of 1968 and preached his hate in the Civic Center. It was a difficult period. I remained a Legal Aid lawyer until January of the next year. Then I got invited by Stan Mazer who was one of these people at the Community Action Agency who had

left there and become head of the Urban Affairs Department at Community College of Baltimore City. He said "why don't you come and teach some courses over here?" So I did. I did that and I...

**Nyasha:** What did you teach?

**Art Cohen:** Sociology, Social Problems, Sociology of the City, that sort of thing. I did a lot of different things after that but I remained in Baltimore . I would leave for a time and come back . I got very involved in 1968 actually. That same year that I was in Legal Aid I got asked to be involved in the fight against the expressway which was coming through Baltimore. The east-west express route twenty- three miles planned over here on Franklin and Mulberry, where they call it the "ditch" or the "gash" - the "road to nowhere" on Route 40, that was left over. Martin Luther King Boulevard came from that period, I got very involved as a volunteer with that. That absorbed probably as much of my time. That was a very exciting fight because it was one of the first times in the city here when white groups and black groups, white neighborhoods and black neighborhoods got together across racial lines to fight something. That's part of what made it effective, in other words nobody could play off the groups against each other, they united. Over in the southeast you had Fells Point and Canton and those people. In south Baltimore you had Federal Hill, you had Sharp Leadenhall corridor. In the west you had Franklin and Mulberry, Edmondson and Rosemont and a lot of other groups. They all came together in these coalitions which was called the Movement Against Destruction (MAD) (this was before the Mothers Against Drink Driving - MADD). They were able to do some very effective community organizing against the expressway. I won't say what they did alone did it but it had a lot to do with the fact that expressway wasn't built. There were lawsuits brought, there were all sorts of things, there were protests. There was ridicule of the officials. A lot of stuff went on and I do think that part of the reason it was such an energetic movement was because of what happened with King, that people were fed up after that. They no longer would tolerate the kind of injustice that had gone on for so many years. And so the road, the idea that you could just take this road and... In West Baltimore, many of the homes, many of them black homes, were owned homes,

some of them were rented, but many of them were owned and perfectly good housing stock. They were put under this condemnation line that was just going to push people out. Something like, I'm trying to think of the number but there were hundreds of people whose homes - they had to give up their homes to make way for this expressway which was never built.

**Nyasha:** How did you see the mood in Baltimore as a whole change after the riots, do you think that the riots had much to do with...

**Art Cohen:** I think the opportunities for black politicians increased somewhat after the late 60's, early 70's. It was slow because the main power person at least in politics was at that time was William Donald Schaefer who was white. He also had some African Americans on his staff but basically one by one the council districts were already - there was the Eastside Democratic Club with Du Burns and a number of others. There were the Westside people who had African-American politicians. The way the system was set up though, today it's easier because they've broken into one-person councilmanic districts. Back then they had three-person districts. So that meant that any three people, any person in the district could run and represent the whole district. Time after time, even in districts which were getting to be majority black, there were majority white representatives. That began to change in the 70's, so I think up until opportunities began to open up politically so that we ended up with Du Burns as the first black Mayor. He was sort of finishing out Schaefer's term when Schaefer went off to become Governor. Then Mayor Schموke, then we had this period with O'Malley and now here we are back again with Sheila Dixon. In the City Council the same thing is true, the City Council gradually increased the number of African American representatives.

Now looking back thirty or forty years I'm very sad to look at two things here which won't surprise you. One is the prevalence of drugs, I work in public health and I know that there are up to sixty thousand heroin addicts in this town, something like that. We're known as the heroin capital of the United States, that's one out every ten people - that's a lot - that's a crisis. Of

course with the drugs come crime. A lot of the crime is drug related, most of it is. On top of that is the school system, this big city school system. I know we're not alone. There are other school systems that have been having trouble too in other big cities around the country. It's sad to see what's happening in our school system. The fact - I think a lot of taxpayers who used to support the system have moved out to the county - Baltimore County or other counties, Anne Arundel. They end up paying into those systems and they're no longer paying from Baltimore City. That's part of the problem but there's a lot more to it than that and I wouldn't and I cannot explain why our system has ended up as troubled as it is. I'm hopeful that with our new superintendent and that maybe with some new people in at City Hall things will begin to change. But that time - we've had many, many times before that in the intervening forty years where people said the same thing. And maybe it did for a while but then it slipped back.

It's a difficult thing and I'd say today looking at Baltimore, the youth of Baltimore are in a more difficult situation than they were in the late 60's when King was shot. It wasn't an easy or a good situation then. There were plenty of difficulties. But it's worse now. The drugs have a lot to do with that. But again how did the drugs get here? That's part of an international business, a multinational business. People using the drugs are just the end of the chain. There are all these other people who stand to make millions off moving the stuff to here from Colombia or wherever, Afghanistan - it doesn't matter - wherever the stuff initially grows. So in a way, the people who are the users here are sort of, they are necessary for but they're victims of the whole system too. I think some of the things that have been happening recently about getting treatment on demand and getting alternatives to drugs and so on - as many of those as we can come up with, we should. Of course this is the kind of stuff that Martin Luther King was hoping to prevent. That's what's so ironic. With him gone, there have been other civil rights leaders but his presence was a very powerful presence just like Malcolm X. So any questions.

**Nyasha:** Did your interactions with people of other races change, you did describe...

**Art Cohen:** That moving away, yeah...

**Nyasha:** When they came back was it different or was it the same again?

**Art Cohen:** I think I was a little different. I'm not so sure how different they were. I think I came to understand better the situation. I had been pretty ignorant before that, so that's going to affect things. I'd be lying if I said that Baltimore today isn't experiencing great racial problems. I think it is. One of the things that I have been working on is in public transportation. I'm retired from public health now so I've got time to do this. One of the things I'm doing is public transportation. I'm sure one of the reasons we don't have a better system is because of racial attitudes out in the counties. It's going to really hurt this town, it already has hurt this town. I did a little study and found that if you look at the five counties around Baltimore mainly Baltimore County because that's the only one that goes all the way around. Carroll County, Harford County, Howard County and Anne Arundel too, every nine out of every ten households has a car, at least one car. In Baltimore City, only two out of three households have a car. In East Baltimore and West Baltimore in the central city two out of five households have a car, that means in three out of every five of those households, people have not even one car. That means they are totally dependent on public transportation. And they don't have a very good system. The system wasn't designed for them. It was designed for commuters and stuff coming from the corners of the city. It's very unfortunate and I do think one of the reasons - Philadelphia up to our northeast and Washington, D.C. down to our southwest - they both have excellent public transportation systems. Why can't we have one? I think part of it is and I think that we are going to have to confront this, the racial attitudes that are still there. People taking things together, taking transportation together, being able to do it without feeling fearful. And a lot of the fears are sort of imagined on the part of white, I really do think. People have moved out to the suburbs to get away from the city. That doesn't only mean whites. Blacks have done the same thing. In fact if you talk to somebody from Woodlawn who happens to be black, they may sound very much like a white person in Baltimore County saying - "We don't want people from the city coming out here." I've heard that - which really struck me when I did hear it, it really did strike me. We've got a ways to go, I really do think we've got a ways to go. If you ask me have things



improved, yes and no. Yes in terms of some of the economic opportunities, yes in terms of some of the political opportunities. Certainly in the judgeships and stuff like that - that became available later on and in the profession of law as well. On the other hand, in terms of youth and opportunities for youth I don't know. I'm not so sure it has improved that much. I think it's hard for me to say how Martin Luther King would feel if he were alive today and came back. But he would have been probably about seventy-seven or seventy-eight years old today. If he were to come back and take a look around what would he say about this? I would be very surprised if he would be at all pleased about the situation involving the young generation. There's a great deal of alienation, a disconnect, and there's got to be some way to reestablish connections. I've have heard from some of my black associates now that - and I was surprised to hear this - I've heard them say "we've missed our opportunity with our kids and our kids' kids to keep alive the values that we grew up with." So, there's some self blame that I hear from older blacks my age and so on about that. I don't know what to make of it but I'm just telling you what I've heard. Other questions.

**Nyasha:** One question we've been asking people that's been difficult to answer is, Do you see it happening again?

**Art Cohen:** Yes, I don't have any doubt about that. I don't know what will set it off. I'm not sure it matters what will set it off. I think there's a level of discontent, a level which expresses itself now in violence. I don't think it takes that much for the violence that's expressed on your peers to turn it outward toward the larger society. That's what happened in 1968 when King was shot. I could see it happening again. If you ask me when, I couldn't tell you that. I don't want it to happen, I mean that maybe goes without saying. It would not surprise me at all if it did happen. And if it happened even within my lifetime again. Not just in Baltimore to be fair about it, not just in Baltimore. You look at Watts, Los Angeles I think people were surprised that was the first one. But then there's a lull for a year or two and then this awful business of the summer of 1967 in Newark and in Detroit. Then with King's death, hundreds, over a hundred cities erupted in one way or another. I think there need to be some really basic changes which we

haven't faced up to yet involving inequality, involving acceptance among all peoples of other people. I think we're still, our society still has a lot of institutionalized, institutional racism in it. I think people's historical attitudes die very slowly. Sometimes you get surprised, because although I do see sometimes among youth there seems to be more of an acceptance across racial lines than there may have been. Then you heard stories, I heard stories. In the Deep South for years, blacks and whites lived next to each other and kids played together, the kids didn't know. They were taught to feel differently. They didn't start out that way. There's still this gap that I see, some of it is an income gap too. The idea that a country like ours can't provide for everybody a minimum, a guaranteed adequate living wage, not a minimum wage. We can do it, we can do it but we have to want to do it. And there are some of us who want to do it but I wonder if there are enough of us yet. I don't know the answer to that.

**Nyasha:** Is there anything else that you want to share about that period?

**Art Cohen:** Well when I was in college - see I'm an old guy now, I'm seventy years old - when I was in college in 1957 we had these assemblies. This was out in Ohio at Oberlin College. We had these assemblies and they would bring in all these notable people. They brought in this young preacher who got up and talked to us for forty five minutes without notes. I had never seen anything like that in my life, and very impressively about the inequalities and injustices of society. Of course, it was Martin Luther King - 1957. Then when I went to Washington, D.C. he came through and talked on street corners and stuff like that. He was all over the news, television news for many years.

I too felt this sense of loss. That's one thing that I want to say. I felt it that Thursday night when I heard about it. I couldn't dwell on it because I had to get into court and get busy like everybody else. I think it was a real loss to all of us. I think it's great that now this university is looking back and honoring that period forty years later because we need to be reminded. There's a whole generation that's come up that has no idea about this, except through a history book or what they hear through their parents, if they hear it from their parents. I think it's really important. King

wasn't the only one to be taken from us, but I think he's certainly if not the most significant one, then one of the most significant people we lost in the 60's. There were the two Kennedy brothers, there was Malcolm, there were a lot of losses in the 60's. Social change and social improvement is a slow process. It's slower than most of us would like it to be. It's slower especially than the impatience of youth wants to see. I was 31 at the time and although that was older than 16 or 18, I was still a youth and I was feeling a lot of impatience at that time. I guess I felt now - it's given me pause to see how long it's taken and how some things are still not made right. It's not like you can go and struggle, and then it's all over and everything is fine. It doesn't work that way - you have to keep on doing it. In our corporate world it has gotten harder, it's got much harder because the way power has been concentrated economically it is much harder to get these things done. It doesn't mean that it's impossible because sometimes corporations can be brought to use what powers they have for social good too. When King was killed, there was this great belief in community power and community involvement and neighborhood involvement. I think it is just as valid today as it was then, but it's harder to see your way clear to than it was then, because power seems to have concentrated in these great big economic entities like corporations. So, I think that's an issue we have to figure out in the years to come as to how to produce the kind of social change that is needed and improvement that is needed. Because - and I do very much believe this - as long as there is anybody in our society that is going without proper shelter or food or the means to earn a living, then it affects everybody. There's no reason - we can afford it in the United States. We can afford it, we have to afford it and I just don't see the decisions having been made yet to say that we are going to do this. Still and all, I want to remain hopeful along with everybody else. That's pretty much all I have at this point. It's something to think back on those times.

One other thing I look at the jails today and the prisons. They have more people in them than they used to have and most of them are black and most of them are young. Why is that? Is that because that generation is somehow more evil or more criminal than everybody else? I don't think so. Criminal is something that society defines. We're having this happen today down there in Jena, Louisiana. There's a case where what might have been just a schoolyard spat, because it

turned out that there were blacks who beat up a young white student, for whatever reasons, ended up being charged with murder. If the racial situation had been reversed, do you think that would have happened? I don't think so. Nobody does. It tells you that these attitudes are alive and well.

I was glad to see Ralph Abernathy, who is sort of a soft spoken guy, after King was shot and killed go on with what had been intended in terms of the Poor People's March on Washington to build Resurrection City on the Mall in Washington, D.C. in June of 1968. That was a very good thing that that happened. He took the opportunity to say "you folks in Washington complain about welfare for the poor." He says "what about the welfare for the corporations, for the rich?" I think that was a message which was heard. I'm not so sure how much difference it made but it was certainly a very important message to get out there. And he did it even without King alive to accompany him. It would have been King who would've said it if he had been alive, I know. So that's about it right now.

**Nyasha:** O.K. Well thank you very much.

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