

Museum of History and Holocaust Education Legacy Series

Priscilla Omega Interview

Conducted by Adina Langer

April 9, 2020

Transcribed by Alysa Matsunaga

Born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1955, Priscilla Omega recorded a Legacy Series oral history interview to commemorate her father, Ira Weiss, who was born in July 1913 and raised in Lake Hiawatha, New Jersey. The son of Jewish immigrants from Moldavia, Weiss was already a college graduate and five years into a business career when he was drafted into the U.S. Army after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He served in the Army Corps of Engineers from 1942 until 1946 first in California and then as the head of a Supply Depot in the Philippines. Discharged with the rank of First Lieutenant, he settled in Atlanta where he married Dorothy Stewart, the daughter of his landlord. Weiss founded Pioneer Neon Supply Company and ran it until his death in 1997.

Full Transcript

Interviewer: My name is Adina Langer and I'm the curator of the Museum of History and Holocaust Education at Kennesaw State University. Um— today is Thursday, April 9th, 2020, and I'm recording this video via Zoom, uh— with Priscilla Omega um— for a Legacy Series interview, during which we will remember her father, Ira Weiss. Um— first, do you agree to this interview?

Omega: [nods] I do.

Interviewer: Excellent! Can you please state your full name?

Omega: My name is Priscilla Weiss Omega. [nods]

Interviewer: And can you tell me when and where you were born?

Omega: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia at Georgia Baptist, in 1955.

Interviewer: Okay. Um— before we talk more about your life um— I'd like to go back and speak about your father, so can you please tell me um— his full name?

Omega: Ira Weiss.

Interviewer: Okay, and um—.

Omega: [indistinguishable dialogue]

Interviewer: I'm sorry?

Omega: [shakes head] No middle name.

Interviewer: No middle name, okay. And— and where and when was he born?

Omega: He was born in the Bronx, in July 1913.

Interviewer: Um— and uh— what was his family like? What did his parents do for a living?

Omega: His mother was a— kept home, and his father— they came over here, I guess about 1908, from Moldavia, his parents, so my father was a first-generation American. His father, when he first came here, he worked in a buttonhole factory, he made buttonholes. And then later, he went into the dress business. My grandfather was actually— had a good um— eye for seeing trends in the future, so uh— when he was a dressmaker— and he did contract to make nurse's uniforms in World War I— so after that, before the Depression, and before the crash in 1929, he and a friend of his decided to go with neon— it was new, it was coming from Germany, so they had the Loft [2:28] factory and they made uh— solid neon— glass neon tubing.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness! I don't think I knew that neon was— had been around for that long as a technology. That's fascinating.

Omega: They got in on a very early curve and because of his being able to see that, they had— they were already very well established uh— their first company, I believe, was named "Superior Lighting". And so they survived the Depression and the Crash because they had invested much earlier and were already established. So they did alright—.

Interviewer: Oh, that's really cool. So um— you— you had told me that your father grew up in Lake Hiawatha, New Jersey.

Omega: [nods]

Interviewer: Did the family move there from New York City? Or had they already been living there, um— as his father worked in the city?

Omega: Uh— it started out as a summer home in Lake Hiawatha, my grandfather, they lived in not only the Bronx but uh— Jersey City, he had an office in Hoboken, they lived in Brooklyn, they lived in different boroughs around New York. And um— so my father, before he went in the army, he would spend— everybody spent summers in Lake Hiawatha— it was in the mountains, it was cool, and then later they made it their permanent home, so that's where my father was living in Lake Hiawatha, when he was inducted— no I take that back— he was living— actually living in Dallas, Texas. His father had suggested to him that he go to Dallas and open up a sign company.

Interviewer: Ah— okay.

Omega: My grandfather and my uncle— my dad's brother— they were together, later, in the sign business, "Super Luxe Neon". And my other uncle— my dad was the youngest of four children, three boys, and a girl, and his other brother was a glassblower in New York. And my cousin still has some very beautiful pieces that he blew. Uh— my dad did not blow glass, he sold neon supplies.

Interviewer: Okay.

Omega: So he went from Lake Hiawatha to New York University, he was the only one in his family to go to and finished college, he was the youngest, and he graduated in 1936, from NYU, with a degree in business administration. So shortly after 1936, from there, he went down to Dallas.

Interviewer: Okay—.

Omega: Lived in Greenwich Village, while he was in college.

Interviewer: While he was at NYU?

Omega: [nods]

Interviewer: Yeah. Um— so, was uh— religion important to the family? Did it play a role in your life?

Omega: Well, my grandmother was somewhat religious, my grandfather was not, even though he had a Bar Mitzvah. Uh— they did have Jewish values, family values, with um— they were charitable and they were fair minded. And they were— [shakes head] they lacked prejudice. My father had no prejudice in him, apparently neither did my grandparents. And at one time when he was still stateside, he was assigned to a Black unit, specifically because they knew he would be faired— fair minded and unprejudiced. [nods]

Interviewer: That's a trend that I had— I've witnessed in more than one um— example of uh— Jewish officers in African American units um—.

Omega: Really?

Interviewer: It's— it's just kind of an interesting yeah um— commonality. So what, what was his education— what was it like to be a student at NYU and living in Greenwich Village, did he ever tell you about that, in the thirties?

Omega: Uh— not really. No, by the time— he was 43 when I was born, and I was born in '55, my brother in '53, and, y'know, the war had been over for some years, and he really didn't talk about it much. Um— I don't— I just lost your question.

Interviewer: Oh no, I was just wondering if he ever told you about his college life and New York in the thirties.

Omega: Not really. But later on, when I went to Pratt for a Master's degree, they had a New York— they had a Manhattan office in the Puck Building, up there, and I would cross Washington Square, from my— where I was staying— to get to classes, and I would always think of my dad when I walked across the Washington Square and I'd look around at the little um— **albeit [7:48]**— the buildings in Greenwich Village and wonder, "I wonder where my dad stayed." But I always thought of him, every ti— because you had the New— the banners for NYU and um— I thought of him every time I walked across—.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Omega: Washington Square. He did talk about Washington Square, but, y'know, not stories. He loved to tell stories, but he didn't tell a lot of war stories.

Interviewer: Sure. Well, so let's um— go to where— so he moved to Texas to start the company—.

Omega: Yes.

Interviewer: And um— at this time, um— how did the family— how did he get his news— did he listen to the radio, or read newspapers?

Omega: He did both. [nods] Radio was very popular, there wasn't really TV at that time and he loved to read, he was always an intrepid reader. And uh— he was shy as a young man, he was always very humble and shy and modest. So I think, reading his letters, it really brought him out of his shell and I think he found parts of himself while he was in the army. Uh— and they sent— they first they tried him with um— baking, cooking school and then they— he went to drummer's school, he played the clarinet and he wanted to play that, but they didn't need any more clarinets at the time. So he learned drums, and then he finally ended up with the Corp of Engineers and running the supply depots, and even— all through his letters— not just the Philippines— but when he was in basic training, then transferred all over the country, he was drumming up business for his father, and he would always— he would— I didn't send you any letters, or if he might have mentioned it in passing, uh— trying to get more business for his dad and even in Manila, he found people that agreed to buy supplied from his father. [laughs] So, he always had business and being industrious and working hard in the back of his mind.

Interviewer: Sure. Leading up to the start of the war, um— did he and the family have a sense that um— war was brewing um— in Europe? Did they still have any family in Europe?

Omega: [shakes head] No, they all got out. [nods] They were fortunate, everybody got out— that needed to get out and they came over on— I can't re— my cousin looked up the ship, it might've been the *Rotterdam*, it was a Dutch ship, and I believe they were on the manifest from 1908.

[break in interview]

Omega: [nods] Yep.

Interviewer: So, when uh— Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, um— did your father ever tell you where he was, or what he remembered about that particular moment?

Omega: Uh— yes, my daughter had interviewed him for high school and he was watching a football game at— I believe he was in Lake Hiawatha— and he heard about the war. Through— through the football game, he wasn't watching it on television, [shakes head] I'm still unsure about the TV— he was listening on the radio, but it interrupted his football game.

Interviewer: Huh.

Omega: And my mother had— she was also interviewed and said they were just in the middle of some errand and they were all at home doing something, and she and her sister called her and said— called her over and said, “You need to come see this.” So she and her sisters sat together and watched. I think just seeing that, outraged my father and he just wanted to do something about it. [nods] I mean everybody was outraged.

Interviewer: Yeah, it was, I mean— it was this invasion of American space—.

Omega: Yeah. [nods]

Interviewer: That felt so unfamiliar and um— it was like a violation that people felt.

Omega: [nods] Yeah, it was a violation.

Interviewer: Um— so your father, you said he enlisted um— and the first training letters that you shared with me were from 1945, do you know what he did between ‘41 and ‘45? Was he still in business and kind of—.

Omega: He had six months, I believe, or less too close up his business— I believe. He was drafted, he didn’t enlist. He was drafted. [nods] And he was very unhappy at having to shut down his business— he lost a lot of money and wasn’t pleased about that.

Interviewer: And what um— do you talk about what his training was like? I mean you mentioned that he was trained to be a musician, to be a baker, and eventually into the army corps of engineers, was— was that kind of um— whiplash? Moving from all of these different things?

Omega: [shakes head] I think he enjoyed every bit of it. He may not have known exactly where he was going, but it was just, y’know, from reading his letters he was never fear, to him it was just a grand adventure. And um— I don’t, y’know, every letter, even the ones I didn’t send to you when he was in the states, that positive attitude was consistent all across the board. He always ended with his health and his spirits are good, and uh— he has no complaints.

Interviewer: Sure. Yeah, it didn’t seem from the letters, like he was frustrated until the very end, when the war was over and—.

Omega: Right. [nods]

Interviewer: Everybody wanted to go home.

Omega: They were all frustrated by then.

Interviewer: Um—.

Omega: Cause it was taking so long to get the boats, they waited and waited to go home.

Interviewer: Right. Um— well, before we get to the end, let's talk a little bit about his time in the Philippines. Um— so when he was shipped overseas, um— you— you had told me it was on the *USS General Hoos*? *Hoots?* [14:21]

Omega: *Horowitz*.

Interviewer: *Hor*— okay. And um— what was that crossing like for him?

Omega: Well, it took several weeks, I believe, and one of the letters I sent you, I don't have them in front of me, oh— they're on my phone, he described very— with details, I'm surprised these letters weren't censored. Um— he described not only the name of the ship, but how the quarters were very close, uh— that there was a theater on the ship, uh there was a place that a band could come, um— it was a huge, huge ship and he— I forget how many soldiers were on that ship, but it was packed. And he said he didn't get sick, some of them got sick, uh— either sea sick or some kind of exotic disease. When he left, he didn't know where he was going, he knew he was going overseas and that he was going to a tropical island, but it wasn't until, I guess when he was on the ship, that they actually told them, uh— I remember as he told about being on the ship, and they crossed Bataan to get to their destination, and he said that he saw fish that he'd never seen, that the flying sunfish or sailfish. Uh— they saw some whales, um— the weather was good, for the most part. And they were all below deck, but they got to come up and do things. He didn't have anything really assigned to him, y'know, I— I know— I think I have a picture— an old picture— I have to find all these— where he was peeling potatoes, that I guess every soldier spent some time peeling potatoes, that must've been cooking school.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah I remember reading that— that letter as well. And just— I loved the descriptions of— he mentioned at night, he noticed the phosphorescent glow on the water.

Omega: Yes. Yes, [nods] that's right. [indistinguishable audio] [16:38]

Interviewer: And, uh— yeah.

Omega: Seen some on my travels.

Interviewer: You've seen that, too?

Omega: Mm-hmm. In South America.

Interviewer: Okay, that's really neat. So what did— what were his first impressions of the Philippines, when they finally landed there?

Omega: Well, in his um— I don't know if you can stop this and I could go get the letters, and find the—.

Interviewer: Yeah, I can certainly pause! Yeah.

Omega: If you'll pause it for a moment. I've actually got the letters on my phone right here. [reaches towards side to get phone]

[break in interview]

Omega: Um— you can start it back if you'd like.

Interviewer: Okay.

Omega: His impressions of the Philippines— she asked him a lot of questions, she was his older sister, and he— she must have asked about animals and he said there were no dogs or cats, and there used to be many thousands of them, and he would let her use her imagination as to what might've happened to them. Um— he described the— he said there was mostly pine trees, there weren't other trees— he said all he saw were pine trees, He described how crowded it was in the streets, it was all army vehicles and a few cars that Philippines— Filipinos were very poor, that they either rode bicycles, or sometimes had the bicycle [waves hand] with the little uh— like a wagon in the front, it was just basically a [indistinguishable background noise] wooden box with slats— if you hear noise, the garbage truck is coming around.

Interviewer: Okay.

Omega: And that's where the people sat. Um— or they'd pack themselves into buses. [nods] And said uh— the children, he was very surprised that the children looked like they were five or six years old, because they're small, but it turned out they were thirteen or fourteen. And he couldn't really get over that, how the size of the citizens, they were very small. And they all went barefoot. He— he never liked going barefoot, and I think it goes back to what he saw in the Philippines, cause I used to love to go barefoot as a kid and he always wore slippers, never ever went barefoot. And he would comment when I would go barefoot. I guess to him, I was a wild little redneck, cause he married this shy, southern little magnolia from Acworth, Georgia. [nods] So, he described the people, he talked about the money they used. Uh— he said for the soldiers, the food, the prices of Philippine food was unaffordable, just a simple meal, back then, would cost— in American dollars— five dollars, which was a lot of money back then. [nods] So they didn't— they ate mostly at the camp. Uh— he did say, when they had their sandwiches and go off and have lunch or dinner, that the Filipino— the Filipinos that worked with them, they would also sit around them with great, big, wide eyes, and it was very hard to resist them. He said they were very peaceable people. Most of them were Catholics, uh— the city of Manila had been totally destroyed, but there were a couple of churches that were left standing. I think there was a general's palace that was left standing. He talked about the cemeteries, and I'm guessing it's similar to Hawai'i [motions hand downwards], where the— they stood up the tombstones, and they were tall and thin. And he said he thought children would be afraid to go where the dead are buried, but there were a lot of families and children, and it was very matter of fact, they weren't bothered by that at all, and they'd leave like food and things, like little shrines to their families that were buried.

Interviewer: Wow, yeah, so he really observed quite a bit. So um—.

Omega: Well, he talked to a lot of people, too. He was just so interested and he did say he spoke to some people, and that when um— the Japanese first came to the Philippines, they were very kind to the citizens, very conciliatory even, because they were a similar race, but once the Americans invaded, he said they became very savage and bestial, and started killing the citizens, bayoneting, shooting, men, women, and children, and they just treated them much worse once the Americans came there.

Interviewer: And his whole role was after the Japanese had already left the island, they were kind of the clean up crew—.

Omega: [nods] Yes, yes. Yes it was. Uh— at one point he had gone hiking in the mountains with one of his best friends, and they got to a certain point and there were soldiers that made them turn around and go a different direction because they told them there were hundreds of Japanese that refused to surrender, and this was like the end of November, December of 1945, when they should've all been gone by then. Um— so, they couldn't do their hike cause they were shooting at anybody and anything.

Interviewer: Wow.

Omega: And at one point, he had some Japanese prisoners working with his unit, and he said they were even smaller than the Filipinos. And they were very surly, they were glad, in a way, to be with Americans, because they treated them well, until they sent them back to the states at the Japanese internment camps. But they— they treated them well and they— they knew they had already surrendered, but there were those that just didn't wanna give it up. [nods]

Interviewer: Yeah. And with the supply depot that he ran, um— I remember reading one of his letters that he had some— some level— of kind of financial control, like it was his role to decide what um— what was purchased or how to approve purchases, um— do you— were you able to kind of piece together what— what his duties were specifically?

Omega: Well, he— like you say— he ordered the supplies, he had about twenty-five men under him, um— he worked his way up to first lieutenant and in um— the, y'know that was pretty much— they were shipping all these supplies, and he got to a point where he just didn't know why they continued to ship them. A lot came from Australia, and the war was over, and they just had so many supplies and they didn't— all they, y'know they kept filing them away and they didn't know what to do with them and he didn't understand why they continued to send things that they didn't need.

Interviewer: Yeah, there's definitely an element of that kind of— almost like— did you ever read the book *Catch 22*?

Omega: [nods] Long ago. Long ago.

Interviewer: But that sort of like— army efficiency doesn't always make— things don't always make a lot of sense— I got that question from the (indistinguishable audio) [24:56] from his letters.

Omega: [nods] Yes, he was very frustrated, and at one point, he told my parents, “Do not vote for Roosevelt.”

Interviewer: I think it was Truman at that point, yeah.

Omega: It may have been, it may have been Truman. Um—.

Interviewer: Um— did— did he— did he remember the real moment of the end of— the real end of the war? I mean the war was almost over when he got to the Philippines—.

Omega: [nods] Right.

Interviewer: Then they dropped the atomic bombs in uh— August—.

Omega: Yes.

Interviewer: In 1945. Um— did he— did he recall that moment?

Omega: He did recall that moment. Uh— they were all very happy to hear about that, he said that they didn't really celebrate or anything. Um— by then, most of— a lot of those men had already been overseas several years, and y'know my father was one of the later ones to come. But uh— he did talk about how much the men with families— my father was single at the time— but how the men with wives and children, how much they miss them, how much they want so badly wanted to come home, and how you had to have a certain number of points to be eligible to go home— I noticed he mentioned those points quite often in his letters.

Interviewer: Yeah, that— that was a really interesting thing, very precise, y'know. You have to get to this level, and you—.

Omega; Yes.

Interviewer: And as a result, had the sense that he would not be able eligible to go home, until later in that process.

Omega: [nods] Right, right. He had to count on that, and towards the end, they also offered him a captainship, and he turned it down because it— because he just wanted to get home and be— wash his hands of the war completely. And it meant he would have had to stay in the army, had he accepted being a captain, so he turned that down. And that's why he never became a captain. He just didn't want to have anything more— he'd had enough by that time.

Interviewer: I also noticed he wrote a lot— he sent his pay, or most of it, back home to his parents,.

Omega: Yes.

Interviewer: Was— was that a prior arrangement or just something that it made sense to do?

Omega: I don't know if it was a prior arrangement, but he was very close to his family and they probably needed the money and I— I don't know that they spent all of it— I know he was trying to save money up, and he mentioned several times, by the time he had spent money for his laundry, he had the Filipino women come in and do their wash, and he spent money on uniforms or extra shoes— boots, that he had— sometimes he had very little— if anything— to send home. So it wasn't— he sent home as much as he could, but it wasn't— it didn't happen all the time.

Interviewer: Sure, so what um— what was his homecoming finally like? When— when was he able to get out of the army and go home?

Omega: He left in February 1945, and um— he sent a telegram— first he sent a letter saying, "I've been approved to go home", which I can get sent to you and also the little telegram that said, "I'm on my way home, I'll let you know when I get back." Um— one thing my cousin told me, this was in Lake Hiawatha, he was sitting there, he was still in uniform, and his Cocker Spaniel, Prince, did not recognize him at first, because he'd been away. And then, all of a sudden, the dog realized who he was and he just ran up and jumped in his lap and licked his face for about two or three minutes. So I thought that was very sweet, that I know more about the dog than I know about how my grandparents welcomed him home. But he was so happy to get home and he could go back and open another business, his father suggested Atlanta, as he suggested Dallas. Uh— it also kept his family lived either in New York and New Jersey, and they'd spend time down in Miami, so with him being in Atlanta, he was geographically closer to his family, easier to get to them. Either north or south.

Interviewer: That makes a lot of sense. Um— so you mentioned that he— he roomed with his best friend, how did— who was this friend and how did he meet this friend?

Omega: He was uh— they actually went to grade school, they went to school, they were best friends for life. And they both, uh— when they were called, his name was Dan **Geltner [30:16]**, for years, we all called him "Uncle Dan", they looked alike, I didn't know until I was almost grown that he wasn't really my uncle. He was another— he was Jewish and again, very um— quiet, very calm, there— no there, he was from Pennsylvania. And they both— he was stationed in France, while my dad went overseas. So they both roomed, they took rooms at my grandparent's house, on my mother's side on Stokes Avenue, it— not too far from the Wren's Nest, where Joel Chandler Harris lived, and back then it was not diverse. Um— now, y'know, ironically, we came back from Europe in October, and the man that helped with our luggage he asked— we just got to talking and it turned out, he lived on Stokes Avenue in the last house, all the others had been raised for condos, and it was just after all those years, meeting this young, very industrious Black gentleman, who lived on Stokes Avenue, with his fam— with his brother. And, y'know, it's like what a small world! Y'know, in the middle of this huge, international airport, to meet somebody who knew exactly where my grandparents lived, on the same street. I don't know if— I don't know, I've seen the house, it was so long ago, I don't remember the street number, but I— it was Stokes Avenue. And my grandparents rented a couple of rooms and my mother lived at home. She worked— she was part of the New Deal, and worked with um— she was a secretary, and she got transferred around, before she met my father. She was sent to Spartanburg, Columbia, um— her sister also had a job with the

New Deal, when she went to St. Petersburg. So my mother came back to Atlanta, all the money she made, she sent to my parents— I mean her parents, my grandparents. [nods] And, that's how my dad met her—.

Interviewer: And what was her name?

Omega: Dorothy Weiss— Dorothy Stewart. Dorothy Stewart. And she was a small town girl and it was actually an anomaly coming from Acworth, to not only date someone from the North, but somebody Jewish. She was very Christian, as were her parents. And my Jewish grandmother, who was a little bit religious, she did not want anyone marrying outside of the religion, so they dated for over four years. My grandmother died in 1949, so he waited until his mother had died, and a year had passed, and they married in 1950.

Interviewer: So what were some of your earliest memories of your father?

Omega: Um— he loved to travel, he was very, very funny. He had a wry sense of humor, he was a big prankster. He loved puns, we were punished growing up with puns of every kind, I mean just bam, bam, bam, bam, bam, they would come, and I do it now, my daughter does it.

[break in interview]

Interviewer: In the religious disagreements, how— how was your father and mother's relationship?

Omega: Well, they were both very quiet people. Um— we all had dinner together every night, mother cooked. She did not have the advantages my father did, she grew up poor, and her parents— her grandparents ran a— in Acworth used to be called Northcutt Station, before it was Acworth— and my grandmother was a Northcutt, and her parents, my great- grandparents, ran a depot at the train station in downtown Acworth. And another relative used to be a mayor of Acworth, uh— they were all Northcutts. [nods] And then my granny married my grandpa, Daniel Stewart, and then my mother was the youngest of three children. And they were farmers, um— she grew up with chickens and donkeys and uh— there were— and I remember going to Acworth as a young girl, there wasn't much to it at all back then. They had the lake, and I— I had other distant cousins that grew up there. Um— my parents were close, they didn't argue, not in front of us, anyway. Um— like I said, my father was quiet and humble, he worked so hard, he worked seven days a week. And on the weekends, he would work at home with this huge desk, I— I have that desk, this is what the computer is sitting on, this big, metal desk. And it's just sentimental. It's not very practical, I probably eventually will sell it, so he would sit here at this desk, and run numbers and things when he was at home. Uh— his first business in Atlanta was on Luckie Street, downtown. And, I'm sure you don't remember, but before the Varsity, this was attached to Georgia Tech, it was another little drive in called the Yellow Jacket. And he would bring home chili dogs, and things on weekends, and it was a big treat for us to— cause we didn't eat out a lot, but he would bring home chili dogs and fries and that was a— y'know, [shrugs] it was just exciting to open up the box— it was like the Varsity boxes— and ooh! There's— there's goodies in there! [smiles and nods] Um— he actually hired his warehouse manager, he was the carhop at the Yellow Jacket, and he hired him, uh— a young Black man and he became his warehouse manager, for decades. He just got people around and he trained them and he created a lot of jobs for people here in Atlanta, early on.

Interviewer: And this was uh— Pi— Pioneer Neon Supply Company?

Omega: Yes. [nods] Pioneer Neon Supply Company, that is the business he had here in Atlanta, and the name never changed. He had his business for forty-five, fifty years.

[break in interview]

Interviewer: And where— where in Atlanta did you grow up? Wha— what neighborhood did you live in?

Omega: I grew up in Sandy Springs Unincorporated. We grew up in a house on the edge of a cliff and we had six acres, and it went all the way down to— my father owned Buffalo Creek, which was part— y’know part of the Chattahoochee River. So we grew up facing the river, and I have very happy memories of walking with my dad, tromping down to the creek down below. Uh— there were little creeks all the way walking down, it was very woodsy. Um— my best friend and I would play in those creeks, and play with the mud puppies, the salamanders, and it was just— I was very happy growing up in the woods. Y’know my happiest times were going— I loved being with my dad, I always enjoyed being with him. Um— I was going down there, down into the woods with him and he used to like to say y’know— [clears throat] “Oh, pardon the Chattahoochee River.” [laughs] And now, the neighborhood is still there, the house is still there, um— he started off when my brother was born, they had a little house on Northside Drive, across from Bobby Jones Golf Course. And then, my brother was born in ‘53, I was born in ‘55, then they bought a bigger house in Sandy Springs, where I was born in Georgia Baptist, my brother at Crawford Long. And um— that’s where I was brought home to, in Sandy Springs. When I was five or six, they added onto the— they added a basement, and they added uh— two more bedrooms, it was a three bedroom house. [nods] So we had more room, they turned the garage into a playroom, for us kids. Um— [leans back] what else about my dad? When I was older, like a teenager, I’d go to the library with him and that, y’know it was just— I love going to the— my dad loved to read, he was a historian, he became so interested, he knew everything about any war in history. If he found the book he had not read, that was a surprise. [nods] He loved history, um— he would often go out of town because all of his customers were in the southeast. I don’t know if you remember, you may have read about the rooftops on houses and barns all around that said, “See Rock City”.

Interviewer: Mm.

Omega: Rock City in Chattanooga. [nods] That’s another whole story, but most— a lot of the men that painted the tops of the roof— you could see it with an airplane, or if they were set far back and you were driving, it was just in big white letters, they sell bird houses up there, it’s just an icon, “See Rock City”. And um— a lot of them bought their paint and brushes from my father, to paint all those tops of houses.

Interviewer: Oh, that’s interesting. So they sold more than just the neon, they sold sign supplies, and across the board—.

Omega: He started off with neon, he sold neon tubing, he sold transformers, fluorescent lighting, uh— brushes, paints, sign paint. When I was older, he’d let me come in there and select nice brushes, I was painting myself at the time. And um— he had— he sold gold leaf, he actually, twice sold leaf to the Capitol, the gold leaf on the Capitol Building—.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah.

Omega: It came from my dad. And once— occasionally he'd let me have one leaf, cause y'know, he'd say, "This is 23 carat Italian gold." And my best friend and I would take a piece of paper and dip a little water and the gold leaf and paint with it. But we didn't get that very often because it was so expensive. But, y'know, it was like, practically powder, it came in a little square box of— I think, maybe 24 to 30 leaves. And each one was in a separate sleeve, on a piece of wax type paper, parchment paper. And, I guess to make the gold leaf that they painted on the Capitol, they dipped their brush in some kind of formula and then, dipped it into the gold and it would attach and, unlike our pictures, which when it dried you could— [blows air], oh no! That's my gold leaf! [laughs] Uh— but they painted the Capitol.

Interviewer: Oh.

Omega: So yeah. And he sold the Tennessee Valley Authority. He sold to Ted Turner, Turner Outdoor Advertising. He sold to Alex Cooley, who you probably don't remember him, Alex Cooley's Electric Ballroom? He sold to Hosea Williams, who was part of the um— Civil Rights Movement. He— he was a very— he was a character, he was a bit of a jackleg, a lot of the sign painters were. And, he drank a lot, but he was very entertaining and always so nice when he'd come in, I— I remember, cause I worked there as a teenager. One summer I worked there, as a receptionist. So I'd meet all these people, and um— y'know he— he knew, and I'd get tickets— if I got lucky, I'd score some tickets to the Alex Cooley's Ballroom, to see acts. I'd get two tickets and take my best friend, who all happened to work with the radio station at Georgia State, and she would get tickets. So between she and I, we'd um— saw a lot of music in the '70s and '80s.

Interviewer: That's really neat! What was your education like?

Omega: Uh— my father helped found Pace Academy. He was on the Board of Trustees, and he kicked in a lot of money. Uh— Pace Academy started with just Kindergarten, and every year, I think a lot of schools do this now, they would add a grade. So my brother started in the first kindergarten, and there were only ten people in my class. Uh— I went through the sixth grade, my brother graduated from Pace, he was in their first graduating class. Um— I went there through sixth grade, and then I went to James O'Reilly, which is now part of Holy Innocents. Holy Innocents in Sandy Springs was very small, and they kept buying more and more land, and expanding that school, which it takes up a block now. It's huge. But back then, there was a middle school called James O'Reilly, I went there, uh— I went to Sandy Springs High School. I graduated from North Fulton, in 1974. Then I met my husband in '75, I was quite young, I was nineteen, I married when I was twenty. So we grew up in Sandy Springs, it was a quiet street, now all of the old houses— mine has not— have been redone, made into mansions. But these were all ranch houses, uh— there were people that— there was a couple from Sweden on our street, it was not diverse— color wise, but there were people from other countries, that lived on that— on River **New Road [45:45]** and now they call that area— because I saw recently, they sold our house— now it's called Sandy Springs Palisades. They gave it a fancy name, I guess because a lot of the houses on our side— we all overlooked the river— we actually watched them build I-285 from our picture window, before that there was a little wooden bridge to cross the river, before we had the highway and it was a one lane bridge, and there were

so few people, you'd wait at one end of the bridge, a few cars, and then, the other side would go, and it was all very civil. I don't think that would happen today.

Interviewer: [indistinguishable audio]— more populated now [46:32]

Omega: There's no stop lights. [nods] People took their turn, and another thing my dad did was visit his customers in the southeast when I was a kid. And rather than restaurants, my mother would always prepare a big picnic we— there was a bakery— it may still be— it's still there in Sandy Spring, I don't think the name is the same— Henri's Bakery. Um—.

Interviewer: I think it's still there.

Omega: Henri Hermans [47:00] and actually, Mr. Herman's daughter, they lived on our street, down at the end. And I would visit Cathy Herman and they had a pool, which, y'know, hung the moon for me! We didn't have a pool, uh— we just had a backyard, with the little playground and um— a place to hang your sheets up to dry in the sunshine, which [shakes head] you can't really do that now, unless your way, way out. My— my subdivision wouldn't allow it now where I live. Uh— so I had very happy memories of my father, he'd always stop in state park and he loved those po' boy sandwiches, so she'd pack those, chips, maybe potato salad, sodas, and we'd stop in a park and eat at a picnic bench. And then later, long after I was married, um— because we married young, and we were both not— we weren't yet very skilled, so we'd work all types of jobs and didn't have a lot of money, but I took after my mother and made so many picnics and took this everywhere, to parks, we'd go to Stone Mountain and spend the day and picnic, um— occasionally, if we could afford it, we'd get a canoe. Uh— back then, I— I think they might still have it, that boat that [motions hand] Dixie's steamship-looking boat, we'd ride that. We used to— we camped out there occasionally, my father didn't like camp out, I think he had enough in the Philippines. He had um— I did it with my friends, so he would go around the southeast to see his friends and collect the money and he'd bring us with him, and so I became friends with a lot of their children. I'd spend the night with— I remember two— a couple in Cleveland, Tennessee and their daughter was my age, and I— my father probably would have not approved, but we loved to watch Sunday morning church, and listen to the gospel music, and they were very religious and they were some of his best customers. But he'd drive around the southeast to these little towns and [shrugs] we'd just did a lot of that.

Interviewer: Yeah, that sounds like— so you describe some of his clients and they came from all walks of life, um—.

Omega: [nods] Yeah, yes they did.

Interviewer: Did you have a sense— did you have a sense for the battles going on or sort of the challenges around segregation and integration and the Civil Rights Movement, or was that somewhat separate from your experience?

Omega: Um— I think I lived a sheltered life, my parents didn't really discuss those things, my— [shakes head] the n-word was never used growing up, I never even heard it until I was a teenager and one of his managers was kind of a white redneck, and he would use that word. But, no [shakes head] there was no

prejudice at all with my father. My mother was a little different because she grew up in a small town and didn't have the experience as my dad had, but she never used that word. Um— I actually didn't realize— it's embarrassing— 'til I was in high school, and I spent my last year at an alternative high school, that kids my age lived in apartments. I just assumed everybody had a house. So, that— that was, y'know, I guess that's when I first realized I was privileged. [nods] White privilege. Um— and since then, my best friends are both clinical psychologists, they both retired, but we had very interesting discussions we'd get— they live in Atlanta still— but we'd get together every three months, [turns head] well not lately, to have lunch and we discuss things like white privilege and uh— what's going on today, and y'know, we— I— I met one of them when I interned in a women's prison and y'know, it's "African American", you don't say "Black", you don't say "Black people", but growing up, they were Black people, or "Negroes". Now when I first moved out, and we lived in an apartment on Roswell Road, the husband and wife that owned the apartments, that was the first time— she called them "n-greds" [51:54], which I thought was very offensive, and it disturbed me hearing them being denigrated. Because that's not how— what I was taught. And we always got along, my father said in the early seventies, and I believe him, cause he had so many diverse customers from everywhere, if he had run for mayor, he would have gotten the Black vote. And I think he would have. He was very, very well liked, he was fair in his dealings, he could be a soft touch, he would give people credit that he probably shouldn't have, and so he lost some money. But he also made quite a bit selling, and everybody liked him. He was quiet, y'know, um— a very wacky sense of humor, um— I know there's more stories.

Interviewer: What— what role, if any, did you think your dad's war time experience, y'know, played in his life, after the war?

Omega: Well, I know being out there, helped come into his— he self-actualized while he was there. Uh— I think it made him a little more liberal-minded, because once you've done a lot of world travel and spent time around other people and cultures, it broadens your perspective. And, I know it did mine when I did a lot of world travel, my brother is a world traveler. My father loved to travel, and after— I guess it was when he had time off before the war— he hiked up and down the Yosemite. Uh— he said he almost got trampled by some of the tourists or the donkeys, and later we went there— I guess I was twelve— I did take a donkey ride down the canyon, but he hiked down there, [shakes head] no donkey. Uh— he loved to canoe, he would— he played tennis. He would— when he was in his sixties, he would beat people half his age, black blacks [54:15] liked to try to play him, and he would beat them— everyone one of them. And he wore [motions hand around collar]— when he was younger and played tennis, it was just the style, but it's what Tupac Shakur did later. [motions at head] He would take a handkerchief and put it on his head, and tie the ends in little knots to protect his head. [nods] Very much like— almost exactly like the way he wore his hair. His hat scarf on his head. [nods] But he liked to win, he liked to win— he— he taught me to wrestle. My father would take me to the Live Atlanta Wrestling, in the old auditorium, downtown. I was all of four years old, maybe five. And we'd have— always have a ring side seat, so I was exposed to gratuitous violence [laughs] at an early age. This was before it was all scripted, it was real wrestling, and I— and I remember somebody ripping a scab off [pats head] of someone's head and there's blood all over the mat by me, but I'd sit in his lap and he'd cheer and [shrugs] y'know, which, I didn't think anything of it at the time. I was just so happy to be with my dad. Then he would send me— now I look back at this [shakes head] and think, "I don't— what on earth did my mom think?"— he would send me into the locker rooms to get autographs for him! [laughs] This little girl, going into these grown

wrestler's— shoving me into the locker room, to get as many autographs before they made me leave. But they know there was Gorgeous George, and some of the old names. And y'know it's funny, later on when uh— Ted Turner owned the wrestling— I don't know if it was still called “Live Atlanta Wrestling”— in the early '80s, I took my daugh— my father and I took our daughter— his granddaughter, she was about six or seven, so this was in the early '80s, we went downtown to the Turner Building, and we saw— we watched wrestling. So my daughter got in on that, but it wasn't as violent by then, as— and it wasn't as close up, [leans back] you— you sat, cause it was— they televised and they said, “Don't get up. Uh— you can cheer all you want, no food or drink.” And I just remembered my daughter had to— needed to go to the bathroom. And you weren't supposed to get up. So I started to get up and take her, and this guard said, “You can't get up”. And I said, “My daughter needs to go to the bathroom, why don't you tell her that.” So they let us go and come back quickly. [nods] But he— he loved to watch wrestling, he used— he taught me to wrestle and he'd always beat me, and he'd hold [raises hand] my arm up and he'd say, “The loser!” And he'd be the winner. We had a badminton court, our yard was on a slope [motions hand downwards] and we had a badminton um— net up there, so he— we'd enjoy playing badminton outdoors, uh— we had a ping pong table, he played ping pong in the Philippines and became very good at it, he could like put the English, y'know do— and he shot pool, he was very, very good at that. And he always, always won. Y'know, I think about Forrest Gump in the movie, how he played the ping pong, and nobody could beat him, but nobody shipped my dad a bunch of paddles. But any kind of sport—

Interviewer: Well he had something of a competitive streak, which probably helped him in business.

Omega: [nods] Yes he did. He did— it did help him. And I have that same streak. Our daughter is probably more like her grandfather than any of us. She went into a business that was mostly men and broke glass ceilings. And now there's many more women working in the auto industry. Uh— but I also signed her up when she was a little, I kept that child so busy; she played basketball— the only girl on the team, she played softball, she danced, she— I— she was so busy and she's still busy, all the time, she's just busy, busy. She works very hard for her dollars and she has that passion that drive my father did. He also had an eye, not only for sign company, but for real estate. It's like he— he was a visionary. Uh— he knew what to buy at very, very low prices and then resell. And he would go to Florida, he would invest in strip malls and things. And he— it was— I used to go with him sometimes, just to look at things. So he was just very, uh— motivated and determined to succeed. Our family lawyer had told me many times that my father was the embodiment of a first-generation American, who took himself, educated himself, assimilated totally— my grandfather did not want to learn English, so, y'know, [nods] he kind of kept— he wasn't that assimilated. But my father, [shakes head] he just couldn't wait to go— go do this and that, he loved this country— he even learned to enjoy grits, which for somebody from the North, is a pretty big deal.

Interviewer: That's great. [laughs]

Omega: So, he loved **whim [1:00:08]** we actually had— it's not far from here in Canton, it used to be a tiny town called “Hollywood Georgia”, and he bought a trailer, which was like our summer home. [laughs] And uh— there was strawberries, he had a cow. Um— I have pictures of us there, I remember being there. There was a lake. It's now where Town Center, near there, and it's filled in, it's now a subdivision. But he named it “Lake Dorothy”, and that's how it was entered in the records and he had a

canoe and a little outboard motor boat, and he'd take us around the lake— my mother would get so frightened— it had a little beach. I don't know if he brought the sand in, or it was just there. Uh— he loved to swim, he would swim when it was thundering, my mother would really freak out, telling us all, "Get out of the water! Get out of the water!" But he didn't want to get out of the water. He could hold his breath— he loved Johnny Weissmuller and Tarzan. Uh— he could hold his breath for like three or four minutes, so he'd play dead man's float. And he'd just [mimics dead man's float] do like this on his stomach, and he wouldn't move. And after like a minute, my brother and I would start to get alarmed— [shakes head] and he did this to us every time and he fooled us. And we'd like push on, "Dad! Dad! Wake up! Are you okay?" And he'd come up out of the water [raises both hands up] like the creature from the Black Lagoon. [nods]

Interviewer: [laughs] That's funny! Uh— he sounds— the picture you're painting, y'know, you mentioned that he was frustrated with Franklin Roosevelt and Truman, y'know, to a degree, he sounds a little bit more like Teddy Roosevelt. [laughs] Like he's that kind of like ver—.

Omega: Yes, to our [1:01:56] He never hunted, he had a BB gun when he was little and he was just, he would shoot tin cans. But he accidentally shot a bird, and he never got over that. [shakes head] I think— I think he never used his gun after that. He— he didn't want to cause any harm. He always had dogs, they were always Cocker Spaniels. He had two, always named Frisky and Prince. And then when something would happen to them, he'd get two more and then, they were Frisk— the next Frisky and Prince. And I remember those dogs when I was small, when we still had the milk truck come and the bread truck. One of the dogs was killed by the milk truck accidentally. And I think one got poisoned.

Interviewer: So, you've— you've characterized on how your father um— y'know was the embodiment of the first-generation, um— American, his parents were immigrants and the whole family got out of Europe. Did— was there a moment when— when you learned what had happened to the Jews of Europe or was there, y'know the um— a realization about the Holocaust as being something that happened during World War II, did that become part of your family's understanding?

Omega: Um— when I was in high school, sixteen or seventeen, that's when I first really took an interest in the Holocaust. And I read many, many books on the Nuremberg Trials, and what had happened. And I asked my father about it. He didn't talk too much about it, he would just say that our family got out, y'know, nobody in our family ever had a tattoo or was ever in the camps. But uh— he would never, ever, as long as he was alive, he would not eat German food or Japanese food. Y'know, my mother, if you remembered Benihana, Japanese, they would give you a free meal in November, if your birthday was in November. And my mother and I both had November birthdays. We would beg him, we were so curious to go, and he would just, [shakes head] "Nope, no Japanese food. End of story". So we never got any Japanese free meal. He liked Chinese food, but Japanese he would not eat, nor German. So he— he— he knew about it and did his own quiet way. Um— showed his displeasure at it. But no, we didn't have discussions about the Holocaust. My grandparents, his parents, uh— his mother died, like I said in 1949, before I was born, um— my grandfather, his father died when I was about five or six. So, I didn't really, and my mother's parents died when I was three and about seven. So I didn't really have the grandparents tell me stories by the time I was old enough. They were all gone, because my parents were older when they married.

[break in interview]

Omega: She was Scotch-English-Cherokee, so she had that thrifty Scotch in her. They knew how to make uh— things last. She taught herself to sew, she had to sneak away— cause my father would have noticed— one of his old shirts, took it apart, and put it back together. She happened to get a beautiful Singer cabinet machine- my father would barter, so he traded a debt [1:05:46] for this 1940's machine, and I used it for years after they moved and we lived in their old condo. And it was just a wonderful thing, I— [indistinguishable audio] [1:05:58] my mother sewed clothing for herself and myself. Uh— she even made um— her brother— her brother had sent um— no her nephew, Richard, had sent a lot of cloth from Taiwan. Beautiful silk brocade, and she made herself like a sheath dress, and a little vest— kind of like a Jackie O- type thing. And then she made me a matching dress, it was like indigo— beautiful color. And my best friend liked it so much, she made her a dress, too, so we could wear our dresses together. [nods] So she was very industrious, she taught me to sew when I was eight and I— I've always loved learning. I think my father, he was very curious and he loved learning, he had— I— I don't know if you've heard of the "novelty gene", where [shakes head] it's just people that always want to be on an adventure, or doing something— learning something new. My dad was like that, I'm like that, my brother is like that, my daughter's like that.

Interviewer: That's great. So, to come conclude um— what do you think that um— your father would want students of history um— to— to learn or to understand learning about his life? What do you think he'd want them to take away?

Omega: Um— don't give up, be determined, find your passion. Go— get educated, educate yourself. Um— work hard, that was instilled in us uh— that poverty mentality to pay your bills first. Y'know, for years I was so nervous and we went without much of anything, but our bills were always paid on time [laughs]. So, that was instilled in us. Um— treat people fairly, um— family comes first, family before— he wasn't a patron of the arts, but he was very good to his family, including my cousins, his nieces— he had five nieces and um— to be brave. He was very, very brave, and one of the letters— one of his trucks caught fire, it had chemicals in it. And he ordered people to go drive the truck away from the building, cause if it exploded, the supplies would have burned up— and nobody wanted to. So nobody would do it, so he got in the truck— was almost overcome by the fumes— but he drove over to a fire hydrant. [nods] So, y'know he— he didn't see um— wartime, I mean not from a stance of being a prisoner or being in the actual fighting, but he saw enough to where, he— he thought it was, of course, very unfair, what the Japanese did. Um— he thought they did the right thing in dropping the bomb. It was a horrible thing, but that happened, but I think it was— I agree that it was the right decision, even though it was, y'know, a moral decision. And uh— I— they had to end that war. And that's what did it.

Interviewer: So, so what do you think then are the most important things, um— for people to know about World War II and the Holocaust era now? What— your opportunity just sort of philosophized. [laughs]

Omega: Well, um— I was a moderate— moderate liberal until maybe fifteen years ago, my father was a Democrat, but he was a Reagan Democrat, and he also voted for George Bush Sr. But my mother and I were what you'd call "yellow dog Democrats". Didn't matter who it was, if it had the "D", that's who you pulled the lever for, and I think there's still a lot of people like that. But as I got older and wiser, and I

look back, and sometimes I— I'm glad— I'm sorry that we had such a long war and so many lives were lost, and it was hard on everybody here, but as Americans, we pulled together and I think America is so unique, and the determination to keep our country free, um— he was fighting for freedom. Uh— he didn't like knowing that the Filipinos, that all their livelihood had been destroyed, I think it gave him a greater appreciation for what he had and what we all have over here. Uh— never forget, never forget what we went through— what all those souls during the Holocaust— how they suffered. I'm glad that people, I think Steven Spielberg was one, he got a list and named every single person that he could find that was in the Holo— survived and didn't survive the Holocaust. Uh— Simon Wiesenthal?

Interviewer: Mm-hm.

Omega: Uh— he's done a wonderful, wonderful thing with the Wiesen— Wiesenthal Center. Um— all the books I read in high school, the trials, these criminals— the horrible things they did to— to human— I mean the human suffering. What they did to children, to mothers and fathers, I mean, gassing them? Really? Putting them on trains and saying they were going somewhere, but not telling them where they were really going. Um— my husband, when he was in the French army, he was drafted and he served in Berlin. And ironically, uh— back then, the English, the French, the American, Russian took three month tours guarding the one inmate at Spandau Prison, um— Rudolf Hess. He was one of the war criminals. And my husband had a three month tour doing that. And he was the only prisoner there, and he had kind of lost his head, he would talk to the leaves, [shakes head] he wasn't a— they didn't allow him anything. They were just in guard towers watching him. But it was— he found it ironic that my husband ended up guarding one of those war criminals, but— but I think it's just a shameful, shameful part of our history. Um— although, we didn't do anything— y'know, it was Pearl Harbor, it was aggression towards us. Um— in Germany, I'm sorry that um— somebody like Hitler could come into power, and— and he started off with his speeches— my husband knew people that were— my cousin also, her best friend, who's about ninety— was part of the Hitler Youth. They didn't know any better, I mean it was a normal thing, uh— but then they— they— ratting out their neighbors and how he kept getting stronger and stronger. And people believing him, I mean that was a horrifying thing, and I hope nothing like that ever happens again. In any country, and especially not here.

[break in interview]

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time, um— I really appreciate it.