

Civil Rights History Project
Interview completed by the Southern Oral History Program
under contract to the
Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture
and the Library of Congress, 2011

Interviewee: Dr. Alfred Moldovan
Interview Date: July 19, 2011
Location: New York City
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.
Videographer: John Bishop
Length: 58:31

John Bishop: We're on.

Joe Mosnier: Today is Tuesday, July 19, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I am in New York City with our project videographer John Bishop to do an interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. And we're delighted and, uh, appreciative to have a chance today to be with you, Dr. A. Alfred Moldovan, uh, to talk about your work with the Medical Committee for Human Rights and otherwise. So, thanks very much for coming over to sit down with us.

Let me have you start, if you would, by just talking a little bit about, um, your family and, um, you were born in the Bronx, and your parents.

Alfred Moldovan: No, I was born in –

JM: Oh?

AM: I was born in Manhattan. I was born in, in, uh, Hungarian Yorkville, which at that time extended from, uh, uh, 79th Street to 72nd Street. German Yorkville was from 86th Street to 79th, and from 79th to 72nd was Hungarian Yorkville, which at that time was Jewish. So, there was a large Jewish contingent there. I was born on East 74th Street, and then I moved to 76th Street, and then we moved to the Bronx.

JM: I see. Tell me a little bit about your parents.

AM: My father was a, uh, baker, bread baker, worked for the Pechter Baking Company. He had been a, uh, uh – what do you call these guys that chop down trees in forests? Lumberjack! He was a lumberjack in Hungary in the Carpathian Mountains. Uh, no, no training of any kind. Uh, my mother was a seamstress. She was educated. She spoke a number of languages besides all the languages they all had to speak, because the town that they were born in, if you walked a foot in each direction, you were in a different country: Hungary, Romania, Poland, Czechoslovakia. So, uh, but I, uh, grew up speaking Yiddish. In fact, I didn't speak English until I started public school.

JM: Is that right?

AM: Yeah. [Laughs] Yeah, so talking about bilingual education, I didn't have any [laughs] bilingual education. I spoke only Yiddish and, uh, I kept it that way, you know, although my mother tried very hard [laughs] to have me teach her English. I was not a very good son. I wanted to speak Yiddish for some weird reason, and I never spoke anything but Yiddish to her.

JM: Um, when did your folks come to the United States?

AM: Well, my father came first in '14 – *poverty*, so poor you wouldn't imagine. My sister tells the story that, uh, when Mother would go out to – on a job as a seamstress, and it was raining, uh, she would have to stay home and stay in bed, because there was only one pair of shoes to go through the muddy streets of the shtetl, the little, the little village that, that they lived in. I don't know if there were a hundred people in it, and they were all relatives. So, uh, he came here in '14. And then, he went back to get my sister and her, uh, in '20. And I was made on the boat and [laughs] I was born in '21.

JM: How about that? Yeah. Um, how about, uh, a description of your community, um, coming up, and then the move to the Bronx?

AM: I have no recollection of the Yorkville community at all. I, I remember the Bronx. We moved – the first place we moved in the Bronx was to Brook Avenue, which was, uh, in the East Bronx near, near Claremont Park. Uh, I have no recollection of it. I do remember that we had a large extended family. Everybody that came from Europe that had no place to go came and lived with us. So, I was raised by uncles and aunts and cousins and, uh – in fact, when my mother, uh, gave birth to me, she was sick for a year with, uh, bilateral lobar pneumonia, which at that time was totally fatal, but she lived through it, uh, and had another son after me. But he died of diphtheria. Uh, so I was raised by my sister and my aunt and my uncles, a real extended family and very close.

JM: Sure.

AM: Yes.

JM: Um, you attended public schools?

AM: Public school, yeah, all public schools, uh, fine public schools. One of the greatest educational experiences I had was junior high school. I went to the Herman Ridder [0:05:00]

Junior High School, P.S. 98 [Public School 98] in, uh, in the East Bronx, which was at that time – it was the second year of its existence. It was an experimental school, a whole major, new concept of learning, uh, and, uh, it was a great school. It produced a lot of, lot of very important people. Uh, I remember one of them specifically, Professor Ruth Barcan [later Barcan Marcus], who then became a worldwide, uh, known philosopher, the head of the Yale Department of Philosophy for many years. Barcan's Law in logic [the Barcan Formula] is named after her. And there were many such – it was a remarkable, remarkable group of people.

JM: Yeah. Tell me about – did you have a, um – was your household political?

AM: No, no, no, no. My father was a good union man. He did what he was told. He went on picket lines, because in those days, uh, if an outfit went on strike, everybody in the union took part in picketing one day. Uh, but he had no political – he was a reader of the *Tag*, which was the Democrat party newspaper. There was the *Tag*, the Republicans had their own, the Communists had their own, the Socialists had – there were four major newspapers. He read the *Tag*, so you knew where he stood. But he never – he read the paper from cover to cover, but, uh, had absolutely no political interest at all.

JM: Your mother?

AM: Nothing, no. Mother was a classical old-time Jewish housewife, although there was a time when we were in pretty bad shape that she took in, uh, ties. She, she, uh, sewed ties to make extra money. Yes, I remember.

JM: Neckties?

AM: Neckties, yes. Yes, you make a necktie – you get the thing and [makes sound]. And I used to sit there and thread needles for her.

JM: Um-hmm.

AM: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Um-hmm. When did you first start to come into the politics that would define so much of your contribution and your work?

AM: Uh, well, I was exposed to it at City College. City College, you know, in those days, it was called the Harvard of the working class. City College in my day produced more PhD candidates than all the Ivy League schools put together at that time, and I graduated in '42. It was quite an establishment and quite a lot of important people there.

Uh, I didn't take part because I couldn't afford to. I went to school in the morning, I went to work in the afternoon, and I went back to school at night. Okay? So, in the morning I took my lab uptown in City College. Then I went down to 34th Street and I worked at the Oppenheim-Collins Building for, uh, as a, uh, an assistant resident buyer in house furnishing and toys. And then, when I finished there, I went down to 23rd Street for my non-science courses. And Saturdays, uh, took courses. And if I had any day off at all, I worked. My first vacation I had is when I went into the Army. I worked all the time. I worked Christmas and Easter and, if there was a day off, I worked.

JM: Yeah.

AM: So, I didn't have any time for anything.

JM: Yeah. When, uh, when did you, uh, start thinking about medicine?

AM: Oh, I've always – never thought I'd get into medical school, because in my day, uh, there were about a hundred and fifty pre-med students at the City College – uh, three guys got into medical school. One of them wasn't Jewish, one of them's father was a professor at Long Island College of Medicine, and one of them had already written a book in comparative anatomy. So, what chance did I have? I figured, I figured that I would, uh, try to get in by the back door. I

would go for a Ph.D. in bacteriology and then try to get into medical school. I never wanted anything else.

JM: Yeah, yeah, interesting.

AM: Yeah.

JM: What, um – I know this is a question with a wide answer, but what, um, what did you think and feel in Pearl Harbor and the next day when you enrolled in the Air Force?

AM: [Speaking with emotion] Yes, uh, that was simply what you're supposed to do.

JM: Yeah.

AM: I wasn't waiting for anybody to call me. Yeah.

JM: Yeah. What, um –?

AM: See, I lived with a, with a motto that I picked up somewhere. Justify [0:10:00] your existence. Justify your existence. You can't just exist.

JM: Yeah.

AM: You have to justify it.

JM: Did you – after, um, after enlisting, did you – were you allowed then to finish out the college – [crosstalk]?

AM: No, no, I – yes, yes, yes, when I – I finished, and then they asked me if I wanted to go into the Army as a private or wait till I got called up, because there was no room. They had just begun the program, uh, and, uh, there was just no room for classes. I said, "Oh, I'll wait. [Laughs] I'm not – I'll go in as a cadet." And, uh, in a short, in a few – I went to work in the, uh, Signal Laboratories in Belmar, New Jersey, as a radio mechanic. I knew about as much about radio mechanics as probably you do. But, uh, you know, they wanted people with scientific

backgrounds, which I had, and math and physics and all of that. So, I worked as a radio mechanic at the Belmar Radar Laboratories, and from there I was called to active duty.

And I took the train down to Boca Raton, Florida. From Boca Raton, I went to Yale and got my bars. And after that, they sent me to Harvard and MIT to become an electronic specialist and, uh, went overseas with the 15th Air Force 455th Bomb Group stationed in Foggia, Italy, with the B-24s first and then with the B-17s. And I had a group of, uh, two hundred mechanics who, uh, tended to the radar equipment on the heavy bombers.

JM: Yeah. Were you in Italy throughout the –?

AM: Yes, until the war ended. And then, I was supposed to go to the, uh, Pacific on the B-29, but, uh – the fact is, I felt like staying behind. I had become quite fluent in many languages and I thought I'd stay behind with UNRRA [United Nations Rescue & Rehabilitation Association] as a translator, because I was pretty fluent in Italian and German and French. Then I got a telegram from my sister that Mother was sick, come home. So, I gave up the idea of staying behind and I went home and I got to her just as she was being wheeled down into the operating room.

JM: Hmm.

AM: Yeah.

JM: Hmm.

AM: Yeah.

JM: You, uh, you went to medical school in Chicago?

AM: Went to Chicago Medical School, yes. Chicago Medical School at that time was one of three medical schools left after the Flexner Report. The Flexner Report was commissioned by the AMA [American Medical Association] to get rid of the medical schools in

the United States that didn't deserve to be medical schools. There were many. So, he, uh, he divided the medical schools into A, B, and C schools. An "A" school was fine; they would go on. "B" schools had to make certain adjustments – get more money, get better teachers, etcetera, etcetera. And "C" schools had to be closed. So, they closed all the "C" schools and they had left three "B" schools, one of mine, which was Chicago Medical School.

And through the efforts of the dean at that time, a man by the name of John J. Scheinen, who singlehandedly took this school and turned it into a Grade A school, raised the money, got the people, and, uh, by the time I graduated, the school was a Grade A school, and we could practice anywhere at all. Uh, had that not occurred, I would have been forced to practice in Illinois, because that was the only school that would allow me to take a license. After that, the National Exam was available to me. So, that shows you how badly I wanted to be a doctor.

[Laughs]

JM: Did you have GI Bill support?

AM: Yes.

JM: Yeah, you did?

AM: Yes, yeah, sure. And I also worked.

JM: Um-hmm.

AM: The GI Bill was, you know, a piece of the action. My father supplied a lot of the money.

JM: Yeah.

AM: And I worked after school. I taught Sunday school on Sunday and worked in an industrial doctor's office at night to make extra money.

JM: Yeah.

AM: Yeah.

JM: Through the war service and military service and, um, medical school, did you – are there interesting things to say about the evolution of your personal ideologies, perspectives, values that would motivate the decision to go to Spanish Harlem?

AM: Didn't, didn't, didn't have the time or energy for it at that time. I was in the middle of a war. I wasn't going to worry about politics. I was going to worry about making sure that my machines were working right and that we were winning the war and [0:15:00] I was not – I was not a political animal in that sense. I mean, it was all there in the back, but, uh, it didn't come out. The same as in City College, you know, I was attracted to all the smart guys there that were doing all the great things, but I didn't have time! You work – you know, I worked night and day, and politics is a luxury.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, what brought you back to Spanish Harlem?

AM: Uh, well, I – I became political in medical school.

JM: I see, I see.

AM: Yes, I became quite political in medical school. I helped found, uh, a major organization, the Association of Interns and Medical Students. Uh, that was the first student organization since the – Washington destroyed the American Student Union, the ASU. The ASU was a major, uh, uh, political organization of the youth of the United States. It was very successful, very forward-looking. But then, at the end, they red-baited it out of existence, so there was nothing at that time until we organized the Association of Interns and Medical Students, which was quite successful until it was red-baited out of existence. Uh, I helped found the American Veterans Committee, AVC, uh, which was red-baited out of existence. Uh, so –

JM: Yeah, yeah.

AM: You know, it started, it started in medical school and started the things that we had to do, you know, trying to get together. I remember we went to integrate the beaches in South Chicago. [Phone rings] Uh –

JM: Excuse me.

AM: Sure. [Phone rings]

JB: Why don't we just turn this off for a second?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We're back after a short break. Dr. Moldovan, can you say a little bit more about, about, uh, the factors, experiences in, during medical school that, that brought out this commitment to a certain kind of progressive politics?

AM: Well, there were a group of us there who, uh, realized that, uh, medicine was a very white, male-oriented endeavor, and something should be done about recruiting minority people and women. And my estimate was there was one single woman in my medical school class. Uh, there were, I think, none before that. Uh, I thought that was wrong. [someone coughs] Thought that was wrong, and we – some of us got together and tried to do things about it. We went and lectured in high schools around the state of Illinois to interest minority students to apply themselves and try to get into medical school. And, uh –

JM: Yeah. Any, any – any range of inspirations in alerting you and making you aware of the –? It's an unusual thing for a white male medical student in the mid '50s to care about these things, for you even to be alert to these things.

AM: Well, if you, if you surround yourself with the right kind of people, and my friends were the right kind of people – we all had the same, you know, we started developing the same outlook and same, you know. We formed the AIMS, the Association of Interns and Medical

Students, you know. I remember we had the first convention and I was elected national publicity agent for it. Uh, but, like with everything else, uh, Washington interfered.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Well, the height of the Cold War and Red Scare and all that, yeah, sure.

AM: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Uh, so you came to, you came back to New York in 1954 and opened a practice.

AM: Uh, I came – I graduated in '50, went to my internship in the Bronx at Montefiore Hospital, took a year's pathology residency in Brooklyn at the Maimonides Hospital and two years of internal medicine at Kings County Hospital. And then, uh, I had gotten married by that time – my wife was a schoolteacher – and I went to open an office. And, uh, I thought the best place would be, uh, somewhere where I could be useful, where I could justify my existence and not be worried about taking, making a lot of money.

Of course, it was a disappointment to my father, who always envisioned, you know, I would be a [0:20:00] Park Avenue doctor and buy a big house where he can come and putter around. [Laughing] That's all he wanted, you know. He wasn't interested in my being rich for the sake of being rich. He wanted a big house to – he was an incredible craftsman and could do anything – plumbing, carpentry, you name it. I remember during the Depression he would, he would, uh, use a handheld last and do our shoes.

JM: Yeah, amazing.

AM: Yeah, he was a man –

JM: Did your politics or your choice about how to move into medicine, did those put you at odds or in tension with your family at all?

AM: No, no. No, no, no. Well, my parents never interfered with me with anything, *anything*. I wasn't told to go to medical school. I wasn't told where to practice medicine or how

to practice. [Laughing] All I can say is my father was disappointed because he had no place to putter. So, I finally, I said, brought him down to the office. He was puttering around the office in East Harlem, you know, fixed things and did things.

But, uh, yeah, my family is very strange. I did what I had to do. I remember an instance when my sister came to Chicago for my graduation, uh, and one of my classmates' mother turned to her and says, uh, "Aren't you proud your brother's a doctor?" She said, "What should he be, a street cleaner?" It was no big deal. It was, uh, [laughing] like my sainted mother, when I got my bars at Yale, I said, uh, "You want to come up and see me get my bars?" So, she said in Yiddish – I don't even know how to translate it for you – to the effect, "Big deal, an officer!" [Laughter] You know, what an officer meant to her – nothing, you know! Big deal! So, that's – you know.

JM: Um-hmm. What's the pattern of your experience through the – from the mid '50s forward, particularly I'm thinking about the community of, um, progressive physicians that you would, you would become a part of here in New York, the Physicians Forum –?

AM: The Physicians Forum, yeah. There were three sets of organizations. There was the Physicians Forum. That was an old one that was started by a very great physician. I'm blocking his name, starts with a B.

JM: Ed Barsky?

AM: No, no. Ed Barsky was with me in, uh, in the, uh, Medical Committee. Yeah, he was one of my heroes. Uh –

JM: I don't know who. I'm sorry.

AM: You would know in a minute. He was a very important guy.

JM: Um-hmm.

AM: But anyway, uh, Physicians Forum – that was one organization. Uh, I joined the County Medical Society. I became active in the Medical Society. I was on the executive committee of the Medical Society and head of the medical economics committee for many years. Uh, uh, when Medicaid went into law, I was very active in seeing to it that it became a valid thing, because at the beginning, it was created to – not to, not to win, not to function. It was purposely created, legally created to be dysfunctional. And I fought for that in the Medical Society and with the Medical Society.

And then, a group of us got a call from, from the civil rights activists: “We need, we need doctors.” And, uh, we met. The whole thing is described in – I’m sure you’ve got the book, uh, *The Good Doctors*.

JM: Exactly.

AM: Yes.

JM: Yeah, we’ll reach that, but I want to –

AM: Yes.

JM: I want to ask you a little bit more. I’m interested in – so, you open a practice. You’re in, um, East Harlem.

AM: Um-hmm.

JM: Can you talk about the, your patients, the folks you helped, the community?

AM: Yeah, working class people like my father. I had no problems. I had no prejudices. No. Nobody bothered me.

JM: Yeah.

AM: I was held up twice in the years I was there. But, eh, hey, par for the course. People get held up in Park Avenue, you know. No big deal.

JM: Yeah. Um, it sounds as if your broad politics and commitments were already established before you came into your practice.

AM: Yes, yes, yes. Oh, yes, yes.

JM: Did your work with, um, the Physicians Forum, other groups –?

AM: No, in Physicians Forum I didn't work very much. I was part of them, I supported them, I gave them money, I attended meetings [0:25:00], but it wasn't until the Medical Committee for Human Rights, uh, that I helped found that I really became politically active. I took off time from work constantly. My accountant kept complaining, "You keep that up, you don't have a practice." Of course, I would, you know, pick myself up, give my wife a package of cash, and say, "Put this away in case I get picked up and sent to – this will be my bail money." She, in turn, would take that money always and take the kids somewhere, to Washington, to Philadelphia. [Laughing] That was my bail money! Thank God I was never, I never needed it! But, uh –

JM: So, let's go to that. Let's go to that early part of the summer of '64.

AM: Yeah.

JM: And, uh, some folks do call on, uh, the Physicians Forum.

AM: Um-hmm.

JM: And raise this question, "Can we find some physicians to provide some support to the Movement activists?"

AM: Yes, yes. Yes, yes, we did that. Yes, we founded the first group meeting in Mike Holloman's office, uh, and I was elected secretary-treasurer. That means I had to raise the, help raise the money. And in two years, in 1964, I helped raise, uh, half a million dollars. Do you know what that's like today? That's big money, big money!

JM: Yeah. So, through the summer of '64, um, you began this effort to, uh – I think the group was formally constituted, uh, late June, early July.

AM: Um-hmm.

JM: And you take up this charge to raise money and get to work on that project.

AM: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, but you're also, I think, in, um, Mississippi later that summer.

AM: Well, I went to Meridian, yes.

JM: Yeah, exactly, in August.

AM: Yes, I went – we, we, we sent groups of doctors and nurses, etcetera, to various places where they are needed. It was my turn, and I, uh, I was, went, went to Meridian, Mississippi. I was there when they found the bodies in the, in the dam.

JM: Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner.

AM: Yeah, Goodman, yes. Yes, and helped arrange for David Spain to come down to do another autopsy because the autopsy that was done officially there was sheer nonsense. And David was asked to come down, and he performed a proper autopsy and showed how, how the kids died. Yeah, so I spent, I spent my first – my first “tour” was in Meridian, Mississippi.

JM: Yeah. Let me ask you. I know, um, I know some of those memories probably are very sharp, some have probably faded into a wider pattern of all your recollections of your work, um, but if you, if you, if you move very slowly in the description, what was it like to arrive, and even to travel there, and then to arrive in Mississippi in the summer of 1964? Can you –?

AM: It was a different world. I mean, I just didn't know it. I didn't understand it. I, uh, I'd never been anyplace – I mean, [laughing] I remember an incident when I was, when I was in, just when I had just gotten to, to, uh, Boca Raton, Florida, when I was an aviation cadet. And I

was standing on the side of the road waiting for a bus. And I got into the bus, and this seat's empty in the back, and I walked to the back. And the bus driver pulled the bus over to the side and said, "Soldier, if you don't get out of the back, this bus doesn't move." I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. I wasn't supposed to sit in the back. So, you know, I was an ignorant Northern white in a different world. I didn't know the world.

JM: Had you worked with, um, with black soldiers in the war?

AM: No.

JM: Not much at all?

AM: No, no. The Air Force?

JM: Yeah.

AM: No, there were no – no, none at all. I did, I did meet some of the guys in Naples who were with the, uh, fighter group, the black fighter group. I remember them, but, uh –

JM: When in your life did you first have an opportunity to really spend much time with African Americans?

AM: Never!

JM: Even up through the summer of '64? No?

AM: No. No, no. In high school I was in a separated class. I was in a, with a, uh, special classes, you know, so maybe there was one Afro-American kid in that whole group. Certainly I don't remember any in junior high school, a couple here and there in, [0:30:00] uh, public school. But, uh, I remember a black kid in Hebrew School.

JM: Is that right?

AM: Yeah, yeah. I'll never forget that. I went to Hebrew School on Washington Avenue, and, uh, there was a black kid there. I'll never forget that.

JM: How – ? [crosstalk]

AM: A long time ago.

JB: Joe.

JM: Excuse me. We're going to stop for a sec.

JB: I want to change drives on this.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: And we're on.

JM: We're back after a short break. Dr. Moldovan, um, tell me a little bit more about Meridian. Where did you stay?

AM: Stayed at a hotel. Uh, it's a very hazy time. I can't remember too much of it. Uh, visited people and, you know, helped, tried – the, the organizers of, uh, of, uh, that were down there.

JM: Freedom Summer?

AM: Yeah, Freedom Summer. Uh, you know, our job was to “lend,” quote, unquote, “lend a presence.” We couldn't do anything medically. We “lent a presence,” so people would know that people are watching you. And so –

JM: I wanted to ask about the “could not provide medical services.” There was a reaction by the state authorities in the South to this type of intervention.

AM: Oh, sure.

JM: Can you describe that?

AM: Well, uh, you couldn't practice medicine. You took your life in your hands if you – you could practice first aid, uh, you could give advice, you could send people to the hospital, but

you couldn't practice medicine. And, and our, our job was not to practice medicine, but to "lend a presence" to people that know we're there. Now, you say, you will hear in the speech that I made for the second march, you know, "We will be there. We'll be there wherever you are."

JM: Right.

AM: You know, that's a – that, I think, sums up the whole essence of the Medical Committee for Human Rights: "We will be there."

JM: Sure, sure. Um, let me just ask you a bit more, as well, about the – upon the recovery of the bodies of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner.

AM: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, can you situate that demand and effort on the part of the Committee for a, for, uh, additional, uh, autopsy?

AM: Well, that was it, you know. The, the people in the Movement were very dissatisfied. Uh, the, the SNCC – don't forget, there were so many different groups that were involved. And, uh, it was just atrocious, the medical report, the autopsy report that had been given by the, by the official pathologist of Meridian, Mississippi. It was just absolutely untrue. You know? And, uh, David Spain, a very important, uh, Brooklyn pathologist, uh, told it how it was.

JM: Yeah. Did you have any contact with white Mississippi physicians, well, Mississippi physicians when you were there?

AM: No. No, no, no, no.

JM: How about with those, that small number of black Mississippi physicians?

AM: I had nothing to do with them, no.

JM: Yeah, okay, yeah. Um, through the fall of '64, the Committee is expanding, opening chapters in different cities.

AM: Um-hmm.

JM: Um, many of them beyond the South.

AM: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

JM: And come spring of, um, '65, uh, as the effort is made to push for voting rights in and around Selma, uh, the Committee and you yourself will be drawn down. Can you –?

AM: No, we were *sent*. We were – remember it was part of being a member of the MCHR that you would devote x amount of time, uh, to this project, and, uh, it was my turn. That's all. As I said, I went down with Ginny [Virginia] Wells, Aaron Wells's wife at that time. Aaron became the next chairman of the Medical Committee after Mike [Holloman], and I went down with Virginia to, uh, to, uh, Selma.

And I was there, uh, when the young people decided they were going to march on Montgomery. Uh, Dr. King wasn't there. He never gave permission. That was a rogue move on the part of the SNCC kids, and, uh, you know what the result of that was, okay? They got terribly beaten up, tear-gassed, uh, you know the whole story. It's all –

JM: Please recall it, because we're filming –

AM: Oh? Well –

JM: And it's nice to have it from a direct observer [0:35:00] – participant.

AM: The, the Committee had obtained the use of – vehicles to use as ambulances, a hearse or something like that. I was in one vehicle. There were a number of them. And we got to the [Edmund] Pettus Bridge, and the people were streaming back over the bridge. And, uh, the sheriff was standing there, and he wouldn't let me cross. Uh, and I said, "The people are

hurt! I've got to go there and help them." And, you know, "I've got to go!" Uh, and he says, "If you go from here, I'll blow your head off!" You know? And he wasn't kidding.

Uh, it was a terrible scene. Uh, there were people streaming across the bridge, uh, crying, limping, injured. Uh, I remember John Lewis had been beaten on the head and had a concussion. He was sent to the hospital. Uh, uh, and he wouldn't let me cross. And I, I, I don't know, I don't remember the moment, but I crossed. I was the only one that crossed the bridge and got to the other side and went into houses to drag people out, you know, who had been, had been gassed. I can still smell the gas. Uh, the shoes and the things laying on the side and the, the goons with their clubs lining the road, along with the, with the National Guard – it was a horrible scene, horrible scene.

Anyway, got back from there, and they sent for Dr. King. And Dr. King came and, uh, said he would go again. Washington was very upset about it. What we didn't know was that he made a deal with Washington. But, uh, the night before we went, this time with him, that was when I spoke at the, at the church.

JM: Brown Chapel, yeah.

AM: Yeah, and told them what to do when the tear gas comes, and I told them not to, not to, if [laughs] the big joke was, I said, "If you're knocked unconscious, make sure you have somebody with you." That made a – [laughs] that got a big laugh. That was the only laugh of the evening. Uh, [laughs] because, you know, being knocked unconscious is very dangerous. If you recover, you don't know if you've got a concussion, and an hour later you're dead, you know. Somebody's got to know that you were unconscious, but that's – you can hear that in my speech. And, uh, this time we marched to the edge of the bridge and knelt and prayed. That was the second march.

JM: Were you aware on that second march that that was – that would be the outcome?

AM: No, no, no, no. I was at the meetings. I was at the meetings, uh, but don't forget Washington sent down, uh, the Attorney General – what was his name at that time? I remember seeing him there, but I didn't – I don't think any of us knew the deal that he had made. Maybe, maybe some of the younger people did know. I'm sure that [Reverend Ralph] Abernathy knew and Andy Young knew, but, uh, I don't know if anybody else did, that he had agreed to stop, uh, at the – not cross the bridge. Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

AM: Yeah. I didn't know that at the time. But one of the things he did, did a lot of traveling around down there, and the deal was that I would sit on one side of him in the back of the car, and Ginny would sit on the other side of him, and if something came threw the window, we would, uh, take it. [Pause]

JM: How did you –?

AM: [Speaking with emotion] I was sure I'd take a bullet for him.

JM: You mean you thought it was likely to happen –?

AM: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Or you felt committed to do that?

AM: No, no, no. I felt it was likely to happen. I – no big deal.

JM: What are the range of ways that, thinking back, that you managed to not get paralyzed in a situation as critical as that?

AM: I don't get paralyzed. That's it. It's not my style. Okay? I – you know, I wasn't on active, but, uh – you know, what should I say? When I was in Italy, uh, I didn't do anything real dangerous. I flew on a couple of missions, but, you know, they were [0:40:00] milk runs,

uh, no big deal. I would – but I remember, for example, uh, going on a Jeep, on a Jeep, over the mountains to Naples in the wintertime. And, uh, you had to – the road was full of ice, and in order to get down the hill, a group of Italian laborers would have to hold the car and inch it down the hill. And it got away from them and, um, hurtling down the hill. What a way to go. But I – I'm not a hero. I'm, you know – it's just not my style. I'm a – I just don't, uh, don't think that way. I never did. I still don't, you know.

JM: Yeah. What was the – what was the impression you developed of Martin Luther King?

AM: Oh, I loved him. He was funny. He was interested. I remember one night – we used to talk until all hours of the morning in the basement of this dentist's house that they had taken over – and he says to me, uh, “What are you doing down here?” You know, what, what's your – oh, what's – how did, um – I'm trying to remember how he put it. He tried to involve my, my, my religion. I said, “Well, I'm an atheist. I'm Jewish but I'm an atheist.” So, he turns to Andy Young and says, “Look, look who's an atheist.” You know, “He's down here. Look who's an atheist.” You know? But, uh, yeah, he was something. He was something.

JM: You would have been, um, older than Reverend King by what, by about, uh –?

AM: Oh, I think so. Yeah, he was a kid.

JM: He was young.

AM: [Laughs] Yeah.

JM: Yeah, I mean, you weren't terribly old yourself.

AM: Yeah, well, but –

JM: You probably would have been about ten years his senior.

AM: I think so, yeah.

JM: Yeah. How about recollections of, um, folks like, uh, Ralph Abernathy or Andy Young?

AM: Yeah, I remember them. I remember Jim Forman, uh, that night. He was, uh, leaning up against the fireplace, you know, when we were talking about politics. I remember I was quoting to Dr. King Lenin's "One Step Forward and Two Steps Back," a very important, uh, pamphlet. And we were talking about that in terms of, you know, how, how politics moves forward, you know. Uh, hmm, yeah, I remember them, yeah.

JM: Did you – I don't know if this, I don't know if this has a fixed answer or not. But, you know, here we are in the spring of '65, you're in the middle of a situation as uncertain as the one in Selma, laden with all of this – not just threat of violence, but active violence [crosstalk].

AM: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

JM: Um, did you have a, did you have a frame of mind about race relations in this country that made you optimistic or uncertain?

AM: I didn't think about it. I did a – I was there to do a job. I did my job. I, I was hoping, I was hoping it – listen, I never expected to change the world, but, uh –

JM: Yeah.

AM: One step forward, two steps back. Listen, the road between Selma and the White House – [pause]

JM: Yeah, yeah.

AM: [Speaking with emotion] I, uh, played a moment in history.

JM: That's right.

AM: A moment.

JM: That's right.

AM: That's all.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, were you still in Selma when the march departed that would continue on to Montgomery?

AM: The third one? No. No, I had already left.

JM: Yeah.

AM: Yes. They had brought back down – some more people came. They brought down, uh, gas masks. And I remember, uh, uh, marching – on the picture you will see I've got the, I've got Dr. King's gas mask, uh, under my coat. Uh, I don't know where they found it, where my grandson found that picture, but you will see in the shot if you have it and if you haven't looked at it, uh, yeah.

JM: So, when you were walking right there with King, the idea was that, uh, you would have, as best as was possible in such a kind of mobile, fluid situation, you would have something at hand to do your best to protect him.

AM: Um-hmm, right. Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

AM: Yeah. My job at that time was to protect him, yes. Yes. Yes.

JM: Was there ever any prospect of someone else being in that role? Why did you emerge as the person in that role? Do you know?

AM: I took it. [0:45:00]

JM: Yeah, yeah.

AM: I guess I was the senior physician down there.

JM: Hmm.

AM: And, uh, that's the role I assigned myself.

JM: Yeah, yeah. What can tell me about some of the women who were down in nursing roles?

AM: Yeah. [Laughs] Lovely, yeah, Ginny – uh, there were a number of women there who stayed with the Movement, became very important. Mike married one of them. Uh, I've seen her since then.

JM: You mean Mike Holloman?

AM: Yeah, Mike's wife. I'm blocking her name. There was a doctor there, lovely English accent. There was a nurse who lives in the next building to mine right now. I'm sorry. I block names.

JM: That's okay.

AM: I just – you know.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

AM: Uh, yeah.

JM: Did you feel, uh, you know – King, obviously, Dr. King and SCLC and that part of the spectrum of the Movement, you know, spoke much about trying to, um – obviously, from this kind of, inside a Christian faith perspective, talked about the beloved community and so forth. Did you –?

AM: I never paid attention.

JM: I'm sorry.

AM: I never paid attention to any Christological, uh – I didn't hear – I don't even remember hearing any.

JM: No?

AM: I don't remember – I really don't. I really don't. If this was a – yeah, Christian leadership when I was there –

JM: That didn't seem to be –

AM: No, I, I had no interest in it and I wasn't – I didn't hear it.

JM: Um, yeah.

AM: In those days there was a lot of – I remember a meeting that I helped organize, which was a seminal meeting in the United States. It never had happened before, and it probably will never happen again. I had on the stage of an auditorium in Washington, D.C. the head of the NAACP, the CORE, the SCLC – you name it, every major, every major Afro-American. That was the first and only time in the history of American, Afro-Americans, [laughs] that they were all on the one stage at one time. Never forget that.

JM: And what was the context?

AM: I don't remember. It was a meeting we held.

JM: For the Committee?

AM: For the Committee, yeah.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Would that have been perhaps the first annual meeting before – the second one was in Chicago in the spring of '66?

AM: No, Chicago is a different thing. No, no. Oh, yes, before that, yes.

JM: Do you think it might have been the first annual meeting?

AM: It may have been. It may have been. It may have been.

JM: Yeah, because, of course, Reverend King was the keynoter at the second one in Chicago.

AM: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Yeah, I had trouble at the second one.

JM: Yeah, right, and we'll talk about that to the limit that you're interested. But, I, I find myself – it's interesting. I ask about kind of your frame of mind and perspective, and you say, "No, Joe, it was – we were there. We were in the moment doing this work and that's kind of – was our – what was in front of us." Um, I was about to ask again, thinking about – the Voting Rights Act, of course, would follow Selma five or six months later. The Civil Rights Act had followed the earlier. Um, but you've also been in the middle of things so close to, so close to the real pressures and tensions, say, that are represented by, as you refer to, Washington and the pressures brought, say, by the national government on King, say, in that Selma second march moment to cut a deal. What was your perspective about the federal government in these years on these questions? And I'm also thinking of how that will broaden to the question of your perspective on medical care in the United States in relation to the state and government and so forth.

AM: I think we're in trouble.

JM: Um.

AM: Have been. Will be.

JM: Um.

AM: Not in my lifetime anymore. We had a chance. We had a chance, and politics was triumphant, not reality. We have the worst, one of the worst medical systems in the world. We spend more money, produce less, cause more problems than any place in the world. People refuse – Bismarck, *Bismarck* invented socialized medicine. You know? A hundred and fifty [0:50:00] years ago, and [laughing] we can't get anything done? It's ridiculous. But maybe – I don't think in my, I don't think in my grandchildren's time – maybe my great-grandchildren – maybe, maybe. Who knows? Who knows? You know? Money talks!

JM: Financing would be one of the great difficulties that the Committee would face, say

–

AM: Oh, yeah.

JM: It became extremely – And I want to ask about how at the meeting in March of '66, uh, Vietnam had also become a question. So, do we take up that issue as the Committee or do we not? Can you talk about that?

AM: Well, I was opposed to war. Uh, my wife and sons marched against the war. I donated money against the war. I joined organizations. But I didn't think the Medical Committee had a right to that, because there were people giving us money that were *for* the war. Now, I can't turn around and take their money and use it for things that they didn't believe in. It wasn't correct. Don't forget: Dr. King didn't come out against the war until much later. Okay? I didn't think that was my job or my business at that time. My job was to take care of the medical needs, to lend a medical presence. I wasn't there to raise money to fight the Vietnam – there were other organizations and other places. I split with them on that. The young ones wanted that. I wasn't that old at the time, but I guess for them I was antediluvian already.

[Laughs]

JB: Joe, could we pause for –?

JM: Sure, let's pause for –

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: We're back after a short break. Dr. Moldovan, I wanted to ask, um, can you describe – obviously there were, there were a range of discussions that continued on many issues. We've talked about Vietnam. There was also the question of should the Committee

somehow shift its strategies and approaches to become a mechanism for beginning to deliver frontline health care to African Americans, not just a movement –

AM: Well, I think, I think I didn't, I didn't clarify one situation. There were two elements in the medical motivations of the Medical Committee. There were two groups of people. There were people like me, who were interested in the Civil Rights Movement qua civil rights, or righting wrongs. There were very important people who went on to very important positions in American medicine, who founded medical organizations down South, some of which still exist. I don't know how many of them are still alive. I remember Jack Geiger, who was a very important writer and ideologue for medical care. Uh, there were others, others I've blocked their names, uh, but I think they are described in [John] Dittmer's book [*The Good Doctors*].

I was not part of that. I knew very little about it, and quite frankly I paid very little attention to it. I'm not a – I was not a – what word should I use? [Pause] I wasn't interested in establishing medical clinics or things of that sort, although – although my office in East Harlem, uh, [laughs] was doing that job. I did that job for myself. I wasn't going down South to start, to start, uh, a practice down there. I, I have my Harlem, and I really wasn't interested. And maybe it, maybe it was wrong. I'm sure it was wrong. But when I raised money, I raised money to do things for the movement, not to, not to, not to establish – it may have been an error. I don't regret it. I did what I had to do, how I had to do it. I was not involved in that. And there was a major dichotomy later on, that had to do with that, with that, you know. They wanted money to establish clinics. I wanted money to pay for doctors and dentists and nurses and people to go down South. So – different, different outlooks.

JM: Yeah. Your direct and active involvement with the Committee wound down in '66?

AM: Um-hmm.

JM: Yeah.

AM: Yeah.

JM: Um, were you active in formal organizations around broadly the politics of health care in years subsequent?

AM: In a small sense, not directly.

JM: Yeah.

AM: No, I went to things that, you know – again, when, when Columbia [University] was occupied by the kids, I went to Columbia to the campus, uh, uh, you know, to lend a medical presence. I know I made a very intemperate speech, uh, the following day. And I remember, uh, what's-her-name again taking me to task for my intemperate speech. I had called the police “pigs.” I was young. I was mad. It was a terrible, terrible thing to see what they had done to the kids protesting at Columbia. Margaret Meade!

JM: Yeah.

AM: [Laughing] Called me out, you know. But, uh, and I – listen, I flew to Israel when the SCUDs [ballistic missiles] started flying, right? [Laughing] I went to Israel when the SCUDs – why? To show them I was there, you know. I couldn't stop anything. I couldn't do anything. But I went there to – you know.

JM: The SCUD missiles, yeah.

AM: Yeah, yeah.

JM: Yeah. '91?

AM: Uh, so I, you know, I took the first plane they would let out.

JM: Yeah.

AM: So I could be there with my friends and my family.

JM: Absolutely.

AM: I have a big family in Israel.

JM: Absolutely, absolutely.

AM: Just to lend my presence.

JM: Yeah, absolutely. Looking back at all this, is there an – this may be a foolish question – is there an answer to why you, uh –?

AM: I live by a rule: Justify your existence.

JM: Yeah.

AM: Justify your existence.

JM: Have there been other, um, parts of the broad social justice spectrum in subsequent years that have really captured your attention? [Pause]

AM: Well, that's a very peculiar way to – I haven't been actively involved. Caught my attention? Yes. I suffered through the, the *joke* of the, of the Health Care Bill. You know? Joke! What can I tell you? All in due time, but my time is up, so [laughs] I won't see anything.

JM: Any other final thoughts or issues we haven't touched upon?

AM: Not that I know of.

JM: Dr. Moldovan, it's just such a privilege and a real honor to spend this time with you. Thank you so much for sitting down with us. I really appreciate it.

AM: My pleasure.

[Recording ends at 58:31]

END OF INTERVIEW