



Paul Kopperman Oral History Interview, September 2, 2014

Title

“Jewish Life and Holocaust Remembrance at OSU”

Date

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Location

Milam Hall, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, Kopperman discusses his "broad and somewhat complex background" including his birth and early years in Colombia, as well as his adolescence and education growing up in Queens, New York. From there he notes his graduate training at the University of Illinois before recounting the circumstances by which he was hired at Oregon State.

Kopperman then reflects on the state of the OSU History Department at the time of his arrival, and the changes that he has seen in History undergraduates and in the department itself as it has been absorbed into a larger School of History, Philosophy and Religion. He likewise notes his current teaching responsibilities before touching on his research interests, including 18th century British medicine.

The bulk of the session is devoted to Kopperman's memories of the Jewish community in Corvallis and of Holocaust Remembrance at OSU. He recalls a series of hateful incidents that occurred in the area in the mid-1980s as well as the response that they prompted from within the Jewish community as well as the community at large. He also remarks on the gradual growth of the Jewish community in Corvallis, the impact that the local community has made on his own religious practice, and prominent Jewish faculty in OSU's history.

Kopperman next describes the origin of Holocaust Memorial Week at OSU and the evolution of his own role in planning the annual event. In this, he reflects on his meetings with around two dozen Holocaust survivors as well as a number of famous speakers who have visited Oregon State to participate in the event. He likewise notes shifts in the perspective of Remembrance Week to include reflections on genocidal acts that have taken place at other points in history, including in Cambodia, Armenia and the Congo, as well as atrocities committed against Native American populations. He also speaks to the program's utilization of technology to make presentations available online.

The interview concludes with general thoughts on change at OSU as observed over a long career, and words of advice for students of today.

Interviewee

Paul Kopperman

Interviewer

Mike Dicianna

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/kopperman/>

Transcript

Mike Dicianna: Okay. Today is Tuesday, September 2nd, 2014. We're on the Oregon State University campus, in the historic, century-old Milam Hall. Present today are Dr. Paul E. Kopperman, professor of history for the School of History, Philosophy and Religion at OSU. My name is Mike Dicianna, oral historian for the Special Collections and Archive Research Center's OH150 Project. We always like to start with a little bit of information about the person. It's important to know where you came from. How about giving us a brief biographical sketch about your early years? Where were you born, memories of childhood and schooling, your family, that type of thing?

Paul Kopperman: I've been lucky to have a broad and somewhat complex background. I was born in Barranquilla, Colombia, in 1945. My parents and my older brother had all been born in New York City, but my father had a job down in Colombia, and so he came down. My mother brought my brother down, and then in my own way I came along in 1945, and was to live almost the first eight years of my life down there, enjoying the sights and sounds, and doing a fair amount of growing up, and being exposed to a wonderful culture and wonderful people in South America. And some of that is still with me, in terms of my experience.

In 1953, the family moved up, or in the case of my parents and brother, moved back, to New York City. That's where I grew up, in many respects. I am still a New Yorker. I did most of my growing up there. I attended Queens College of the University of New York, got my bachelor's and my master's. At the time I started out, my ambition was to become a veterinarian, and I was a biochem major. I certainly had—I have an interest in history. I'd taken my share in high school and had liked it tremendously, but I did not—I certainly hadn't thought of a career, or even minoring in it. I didn't take any history until my sophomore year, and even then it was entirely by chance, because I was closed out of a group of courses that I was really supposed to take, heavy in the sciences, and I decided rather than go a semester without a full program, I would round it out with some other courses.

One that I took was, as it turned out, a life-changing course on Medieval Europe. I really—I loved the professor and I loved the course, and I really became enamored of history. I started taking more and more of it, and finally as a junior, I guess I can say, I had a talk with myself on whether I should go on then and become the best veterinarian I could be, or whether I should concentrate on becoming the best historian that I could be. And I chose the latter. But I did weigh the consequences, pros and cons, both sides, and this is what I came up with, and I've never regretted that decision. So anyway, it was Queens College for me, for my bachelor's and my master's.

While before I actually completed my master's by submitting my thesis at Queens, I went out to the wide open spaces of central Illinois, and went for my PhD in History at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. Finally received that in the summer of 1972 [0:05:01], by which time I had already accepted my first university appointment, this being at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, where I taught British history. My PhD was in British History, particularly in the Tudor-Stuart, 16th and 17th centuries, and I decided to go on with this as my specialty. It was very attractive to me. I had also been attracted to the Reformation period, and this dovetailed, so those two subjects worked together well.

In any case, I went to Macquarie University, spent two wonderful years in Australia, from August 1972 to August 1974. And then returned to the States, I suppose to the real world. I had thought while I was in Australia that I would be able to undertake various writing projects, and that when I returned to the States there would be some fine job at a major university waiting for me. And it was not that way at all. At that time, and I'm sure the situation is very different today, but at that time, the library resources in Australia were not ideal for the sort of research I was interested in doing. Today it would be truly a different world, with the internet, and so many sources that I would have wanted to use being readily available online. But this was 40 years ago, and I went back to the States thinking, well, if I just did some writing, I would find that dream job.

I did some writing; in fact I did lots of writing. Along the way I had become interested in a project I ran across entirely by chance, and that was a battle that took place in July 1755, and touched off the war that we know as the French and Indian War, or the Seven Years War in America. And this was Braddock's Defeat, and if one just knows the name, one knows the two most important things about it: first of all, that there was this man named Braddock, specifically he was Major General Edward Braddock, who was Commander in Chief of the British Army in North America, and yes he was there.

And then, well, one also knows from the name that he was defeated, badly defeated, and in fact mortally wounded in this battle.

In any case, I'd become interested in Braddock's Defeat and the Braddock Expedition, after having run across some manuscript accounts of it quite by chance. And I eventually would write my first book, analyzing the expedition and the climactic battle. I also did some other writing, and well, it really did not at first get me anything. So I went back to New York City. I had been working out at the University of Illinois again, because the library is wonderful. I went back to New York City and lived with my mother for a couple of years, and worked in a factory. [0:10:00]

And at the end of it I was contacted by the University of Illinois, and asked if I wanted to come and teach a course on American military history, and I jumped at the chance, ignoring the minor problem that, aside from Braddock's Defeat, I really knew very little about American military history. But I had a great belief that if you don't know, just study hard, read a lot, and learn. And that is what I did. I went out to the U of I in the spring, winter-spring semester in 1978, and put together a set of lectures on American history that I'm still very proud of, and often consult.

But then I was fortunate enough to get a call from the Chairman of the History Department of Oregon State University, encouraging me to come here to teach starting the fall of 1978. I'd have to say in all honesty, if someone asks me, "Well, why are you in Oregon?" or, "Why did you go to Oregon?," my answer, as would be the honest answer of an awful lot of people, is, "I got a job here." And so I did come out here, and have been very, very happy during my time here, and have in many respects gotten to see OSU, and notably the College of Liberal Arts and the Department of History, grow and flourish in my time.

MD: Well, this is exactly what we're wanting to hear. Let's back up. Just a couple of things I want to touch on, just for fun.

PK: Mm-hm.

MD: Now, you were in college, and I imagine that Queens College is urban, downtown type thing? And you were there during the unrest of the 1960s. What was happening, protests, sit-ins, things like that. Was Queens College in the center of that, or were you involved at all with the anti-war movement?

PK: Actually, Queens was rather quiet politically at that time, because it was a commuter college. We didn't see each other, except for our good friends, much off campus. There was actually more political activity at the University of Illinois during my time there. And yes, we had our student demonstrations, notably after the killings at Kent State in 1970. We had a student strike then. But for the most part, Queens itself was still rather quiet as a campus. There were individuals who were very much involved, including, I believe, two of the three young men who were murdered in Mississippi during the efforts to register African Americans to vote.

There were those of us who were very much involved in political activity. I myself, in some comparatively minor, and I would have to say unheroic ways, but we had our people who were very much caught up. Really at that time, if one wanted to be very strongly active in the New York City area, he or she went to Columbia University. They were really much more noted for their activism than Queens College, Brooklyn College, etcetera, the various colleges in the City University system, given again that they were more commuter colleges.

MD: Did you live in Queens, as the reason why you—

PK: Oh, yes.

MD: —that's why you went to Queens?

PK: Yes, and as a matter of fact, it was kind of standard in my circumstances that one went to Queens College. [0:15:00] I still remember going to the graduate ceremony for Forest Hills High School, which I attended. And by the way, Forest Hills High was—we had a very noted graduate body, not speaking for myself, but Paul Simon had graduated from Forest Hills a couple of years before, and played on the baseball team. But anyway, I was at the graduation of my class at Forest Hills High. I remember the principal basically reading off a whole batch of numbers about the graduating class, that first

of all, as I recall, that 96 percent of us were going to be going on to college, and that 88 percent of us were going to be going on to Queens College. So it was a common destination.

But let me also say this, and this would have more significance to a student today, and that is that Queens College provided a very fine education. It had excellent faculty, good, good resources, and it was all free. There was no tuition. And of course for most of us, we were living at home, so our college education cost us very, very little. And yet as I say, we were getting a first-rate education. Anyone at that time who was a resident of the five boroughs of New York City, and who graduated from one of the high schools in New York, was guaranteed a free education within the confines of the City University of New York, including, if he or she qualified—

MD: Yeah.

PK: I mean, now the qualifications are higher. But if you had the grades, you could go on to one of the four-year colleges in the City University system, and I chose Queens. Things have obviously changed so much since then, but have changed really for higher education in the public sphere. Public universities back in the '60s were generally quite inexpensive, even if the City University of New York was exceptional. It was not really that expensive to go to one of these schools. I guess I should add in full candor that we did have to pay student fees, which were \$24 per semester—

MD: [Laughs]

PK: —when I was at Queens, except during my senior year, when they were raised to \$34 per semester. I could afford it.

MD: There are students today that are probably just cringing to hear that. But it's a sign of the times.

PK: Yeah. And it's a painful sign. I really think that as a national community, we're not really valuing and supporting inexpensive higher education as we should be. I'm not an economist. I wouldn't really be qualified, in terms of saying just how much a vision like this could be realized in the context of today.

MD: Yeah.

PK: But I do like to feel that it would be very desirable, especially as I hear stories of young people graduating from university in debt for \$150,000, \$200,000. And this is just scandalous, I think. [0:20:00]

MD: Yes, I believe so. So, you arrive in Oregon, a transplant to the Pacific Northwest. So, teaching, you began as a visiting professor in 1978, and so you've been here for 36 years past that point. Let's talk a little bit about your early years here at OSU. What was the History Department like during the early 1980s, your colleagues?

PK: Well, of course, I still have one left, just one, and that's Gary Ferngren, who actually preceded me, and has been here since 1970, so eight years longer than I have. And I met him my first day on campus here in early September 1978, and in fact was introduced to any number of colleagues that first day, just wonderful people. But I suppose my greatest recollection of that day is really meeting Don McIlvenna—fine person, unfortunately passed away a few years ago. Wonderful sense of humor. He and another colleague and I had lunch together, I mean, Don invited me to lunch, and I still remember him telling me at lunch that I was here to teach; at Oregon State we emphasize teaching.

And I believe that is still the case, at least in History. We pay a lot of attention to teaching, to the needs of students. I mean, teaching may be easy. Teaching well is very hard, and involves lots and lots of work, lots of hours, lots of reading, lots of thinking about presentation, etcetera. I mean, the classroom performance is just a small part of it, and one needs, or at least one should be ready to make sacrifices associated with teaching well, and teaching in a way that is useful to a broad body of students. I don't personally believe that a higher education is a one-size-fits-all system. Students have their strengths and weaknesses; they have their difficulties as individuals, and to the extent possible, these need to be catered to.

I frankly wish, on the other hand, that students were as a group more willing to contact the professor, preferably early in the term, and say, "Help, I'm in trouble," and communicate on this. Unfortunately, so many of them wait until the end of the term, and it's much more constraining then, on both sides, as regard to what can be done.

MD: And you would probably say that some things never change? It's like the student today is like the student of 1978 in that regards?

PK: Well, [sighs] maybe. I mean, I look for signs. I still remember back, oh, even in the late '80s, but certainly in the '90s, there were people who had a vision of impending doom, that as students began to work more and more with computers, their quality of work at the university would decline. [0:25:02] For a long time, I didn't see this. I am concerned that in some respects I'm seeing it now.

I don't think that students today as a group—I'm not talking about everybody certainly—but as a group, are as willing to read difficult and lengthy texts as they were, we'll say, back in the '70s. I hate to talk about my day. I'm old enough as it is, and saying, "My day," just makes me sound even 20 years older. But I don't think that students are as willing to read. They're used to having information conveyed to them quickly and simply, à la Wikipedia. And this is problematical. I'm not sure that students are as strong, as regards certain skills, as they used to be.

And one seldom hears about this, but one area where I frankly don't think that they are doing nearly as well as did students 40 years ago is their note-taking skills are way down. Just judging from exam questions that may be based on something I said in lecture, and what I'm seeing in the answers, as well as just by looking around the classroom during lecture, they just don't seem to be getting as much down, or making as much sense of it. It may not be just a quantity issue. In fact, I don't think it is, but I don't think they are seeing connections, how things tie together. I don't think their notes suggest many connections; it's just points that they happen to hear and write down.

MD: That just caught their ear, and, yeah.

PK: This is of concern to me. I don't know if it reflects what's going on in terms of their background, in terms of high school, etcetera, but their note-taking skills are really down compared to what they were 20 years ago or so. And yet, let me say this. I have had students here over the years that I thought of as awesome. I mean, just students who made me think, "Wow! This student is so smart, is so deep, so willing, so anxious to learn, and willing to work to learn!" Then students with perfect attitudes, who not only would have been right at home 30 or 40 years ago, but would have been right at home at Harvard or at Oxford 30 or 40 years ago, just the cream of the crop.

MD: Well, I know that that's what I—

PK: As a prof you love to see this. I love to see it, to just see these sparks. That's beautiful!

MD: That's what I would tell my fellow students, that you've got to realize this is college as it was. This isn't computerized college of today. This is lecture, this is knowledge, this is what you're giving to the class. And a lot of them just didn't catch that. Not to sound like a sycophant, but I was—I hung on every word of your lectures. And that was my problem with notes, is I was trying to write every word down because of that. [0:30:01]

PK: Uh-huh.

MD: But yeah, it's a different world, I think, for students, the ones that I've come into contact with. And being a nontraditional student, I always kind of went at it from a different angle than a lot of them did. One of the things that I was curious about is the changes in the department over this period of time, over this three decades and a half.

PK: Mm-hm.

MD: The new Department of History, Philosophy and Religion has changed the picture quite a bit. And this is more of an administrative thing from the top down than changes, but how about interdisciplinary collaboration, and things like that? Is that a good part of this new department?

PK: Absolutely. I would have to say, and again in all candor, not everyone, not all of my colleagues were thrilled by the prospect of the amalgamation of History and Philosophy into this school. I saw lots of advantages to it. For one thing, I was fairly close to some members of the Philosophy Department. I mean, I mentioned Gary Ferngren as one who's been here even longer than I have. Well, the same is true of Flo Liebowitz over in Philosophy. I am sure that I met her my first

year here. Others younger than she, but still sort of our cohort, I met within a few years. They would join the Philosophy Department.

At the time I arrived, there was still a Religious Studies Department, Marcus Borg being certainly the best known member of that department. But there was that until the early 1990s, when there was a fiscal crisis here. We've had a few of them in my time at OSU. And that department was folded into Philosophy, and some of the senior members became professors of philosophy, whereas they had been professors of religious studies. That was unfortunate. I'm personally hopeful that, of course, the school—I remember I was History, Philosophy and Religious Studies, and I am hoping that in the quite near future we will have a Religious Studies major again. And I am certainly very far from being the only one who is hoping this.

We really have the basis for a fine Religious Studies program, excellent faculty covering considerable range of interests, and I would hope that this will come soon. But anyway, I myself have got involved in that. I advise our Religious Studies Club, which was founded, oh, about a bit over a year and a half ago. And I play my part; so do a number of colleagues in history. So we look for a kind of crossover, and we see that perhaps even more than in History and Philosophy, per se. We see a lot of it in History and Religion.

MD: Mm-hm.

PK: And I would anticipate that this is going to increase down the road, and certainly we that can have—there can be programs that incorporate History and Philosophy both. We have our program on Peace and Conflict, for example, which can embrace the range of courses that can include on one hand military history [0:35:02], or my own course on "Why War?," but on the other hand, can incorporate ethical issues associated with perhaps civil disobedience and something of its history, or the sort of pacifism that one might associate with Gandhi, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. So we can move together. We have these programs that allow for a breadth of faculty, and of course of students, and yet have some inner cohesion to them, which is very important, too. They're not just a mass of courses that don't bear much relationship to each other. There is this inner coherence.

MD: Well, one of the things I was wondering about was what are your plans over the next few years? I mean, you've been a fixture in this department for so long. Where do we go from here? You're not going anywhere, I hope.

PK: Not for a while, at least not by choice. Let's see. Well, earlier this year I accepted a new administrative position as the associate director for history in the school. I will have that for at least until the end of this academic year, so there will be some new responsibilities associated with that. Beyond that, I am very interested—one thing I should say, in terms of what has been changing, and a very, very positive aspect of the technical, this technological revolution that we're still going through, is the improvement in distance learning. And this can be wonderful. Like anything, it has pros and cons. It is not by any means an unmixed blessing. We have to be very, very careful about quality control.

But it can provide all kinds of advantages to students. I'm very much involved in this. I do teach two courses online, and within, well, one of my courses will I am in the process of re-recording, and I hope—well, it's actually served very well, but I'm making some changes to it, as I always do. And I will probably be re-recording my other lecture in my other course in a couple of years. I love the potential for online teaching. As I say, I can see problems with it, too, but I frankly feel that the difference in quality between taking a course online and taking a class is minimal, if the course is well-handled. And there are some very bad online courses, but then again there are some very bad in-class courses, too. Again, I go back to that point about how hard is the instructor willing to work? If he is willing to put in the amount of hours, do lots of reading, and lots of thinking about what he is reading, he can produce a first-rate online course. If he's just trying to somehow get by, well, he can put together a not very good online course, or for that matter, a not very good in-class course. So I'll keep on going with that, and I would hope that even after I retire—and I'm certainly not setting a date on that—that I'll go on teaching my online courses. [0:40:02]

But otherwise, well, my biggest writing ambition is to finish a project that I've been involved in for a long time, and which perhaps sounds a little more exotic than it is. My interests that began with the Braddock Expedition grew into an interest in the 18th century British Army, which grew into an interest in 18th century British medicine. And I typically write these days on either British medicine or the British Army, or some combination. And my next book, which I hope to finish in

the next couple of years, is going to be a study of sickness and health in the British Army, in North America and the West Indies, from 1755, the start of the Seven Years' War in North America, to 1783, and the end of the American Revolution.

MD: Hm.

PK: So this is what I am working on. It's something that I have been—as a field, as an area, it's something I have been working on for several decades. But my vision of how I plan to construct this book, and just what questions I'll ask, and what answers I'll look for, that aspect keeps evolving, and that's exciting to me. Still, a very famous historian once said that the main difficulty that young historians have is deciding to stop doing research and start writing. And I would qualify that only by saying that's also a problem for middle-aged historians and senior historians.

MD: [Laughs]

PK: But research is so much fun, and we always think, "Oh, I can, I can—I'm on the verge of finding that out, and oh, just a little more time!" There is a time to say, "Okay, the research is all done. I've got lots and lots and lots of data, and now it is time to write." And I feel I am pretty much to that time. I have other interests. I'd like to do something on how people in 18th century Britain tried to stay healthy. I've been doing quite a bit of work on exercise in the 18th century in Britain, for example. There are a lot of topics I'm interested in, some for books, some for articles, but at any rate, first and foremost, there is going to be this study of sickness and health in the 18th century British Army.

MD: Fascinating stuff. Well, let's switch gears a little bit. One of the things that both Chris Petersen, in my office, and I was interested in finding out about, your experiences with the local Jewish community here in Corvallis, and in Oregon. Has it changed since when you first came here, and any special memories or experiences with the community?

PK: Oh. Again, a lot of them, I—there too, just as that first day in early September 1978, as I was meeting my new colleagues in the History Department, I made some phone calls and met some members of the Jewish community. I was relieved, first of all, that there was a Jewish community, and even a small branch of Hillel, the national Jewish student society, national and indeed international. And in fact I was to be the Hillel advisor for more than 20 years.

MD: Hm.

PK: 1980 to 2001. Of course, I've made a lot of friends through the Jewish community here, but I also think it's important to consider the Jewish community in terms of the broader community [0:45:03], and Oregon is very welcoming of different perspectives on, not just religious issues, but including religious issues. And I had the sense very early on that this was a welcoming community.

Back in the 1980s, particularly between 1983 and 1985, we had a number of incidents in and around Corvallis involving the distribution of anti-Semitic materials, Neo-Nazi materials. There was also a program put out on public access TV in Corvallis in 1985, a hate program. People of leading hate groups were interviewed, sympathetically interviewed. The MC of the program was himself an ardent Klansman and white supremacist. In any case, there was a lot of nastiness, and I was one of those members of the Jewish community who felt that we should, when we were the recipients of hate mail, that we should let people of our community know about it. And we did, and not at all to my surprise, practically every element in that broader community, along with individuals, stood up for us, denounced the perpetrator or perpetrators of these hate mailings and other incidents of harassment, etcetera, and this didn't surprise me.

That's because I really felt I knew the community here, and which way it tended. In any case, I've never encountered any difficulties here being Jewish. I've certainly never made a secret of it. And that is the way it should be. This is really what America is all about. Beyond this, well, I'm pleased to see the way our Jewish community here has grown. At the time I arrived, our Jewish organization in town was very small, and we would meet in each other's homes to have our services, etcetera, and our get-togethers. Now we have a nice big house, and for our larger activities, we make use of religious facilities that are provided to us by various churches here in town. We also have a full-time rabbi. I mean, this wasn't even a dream as of 1978.

MD: Wow!

PK: Things have just changed so much, and it's great to see. And I feel that it's also wonderful to see so many young people raising their children, having them go to Sunday school here [0:50:00], and usually into more advanced tutorial-type programs, and have their Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and having a good, good Jewish consciousness and education.

MD: Okay, yeah, because you come from the East Coast, where there's a culture. There's a huge community. It must have been a big shock to find a—or not shock, maybe you were kind of expecting it to not be as large of a community here?

PK: Yes, and yet I—of course I've been in between. I've been at the University of Illinois, which had a significantly larger Jewish component than has Oregon State, but nevertheless, the Jewish proportion of the population in Champaign-Urbana on and off campus was certainly not what I would have known back in New York City.

MD: Yeah.

PK: When I went to Queens College, a majority of the students were Jewish. In a way, this was important to me personally as a Jew, because I couldn't—in New York, you just sit back and Judaism came to you. And out here, it was to some degree a do-it-yourself situation, and I sort of liked that, or I grew to like it, that I was the one who had to learn. I couldn't just wait to be handed Judaism. I think that I grew faster and better as a Jew in Corvallis than I would have in a comparable span of time in New York City, because there Judaism was all around me.

MD: Yeah. That's absolutely fascinating. I never thought of it in that perspective. Now, I suppose you probably know a lot about the history of the Jewish community in Corvallis and all. Was there ever a synagogue here, and had there been a period of time when it was a larger community here? I know Professor Nathan Fasten, who was a—he was a professor in the '30s, said he was the only Jew in town when he left, but.

PK: That could have been. That far back, I really can't go.

MD: Yeah, this was 1936 or something.

PK: But there were always a few Jews. Actually, I guess I can add, there was another community in Albany, which at times was really the central Jewish community in the mid-Willamette Valley.

MD: Oh.

PK: But as for Corvallis, I really think that it went back to the 1950s.

MD: Mm.

PK: And we did have some Jewish faculty here, very prominently. We had Bernard Malamud, the famous novelist. He got his start, wrote a famous book about his years, a novel, a fictional, semi-fictionalized account of his time at Oregon State College back then. So there was some degree of Jewish presence. I think one could hardly have expected there wouldn't be. But really, I think very important back in the late '50s, several couples came here who were very committed to, not only to Judaism, but to establishing Jewish community, and it grew from them. Perhaps most prominently, the Orzechs, Ze'ev Orzech and his wife Mimi. Mimi is still alive; Ze'ev passed away several years ago. For many years he was a professor of economics and Mimi was faculty in education [0:55:03], then went more into administration. For a time she was assistant vice president here. She had a very active career.

And anyway, the Orzechs and several other families that came roughly this time, late '50s, early '60s, really built the Jewish community so that it wasn't just individual Jews who happened to be teaching at Oregon State, or maybe the occasional odd Jewish student at Oregon State, but now there was the coming together of a real community. And I'm glad I was here for much of that.

MD: Well, this is the perfect segue into one of the most important parts of your involvement here at Oregon State, and that's the Holocaust Memorial Week Program. It's been an important event here for the last 27 years, and I know that you've been involved basically since its inception. A little bit about how the memorial week began, and how it worked in the early years?

PK: Well, I can't actually give the entire story. I can get us close to the beginning, but not the absolute beginning. I mentioned that there was a lot of nastiness in Corvallis in the mid-'80s. While this was going on, what would grow into the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which would finally be opened in 1993, in, of course, Washington, DC, was progressing. One of the things that it did was to take advantage of an act of Congress in 1979 establishing a particular week each spring as, well, it was usually called a Holocaust Remembrance Week—it has a longer name than that, but we can let it go at that—and very much encouraging municipalities, and also colleges and universities, to do something by way of observing this week, sending out literature, sending out posters, sending out booklets with ideas for programs. So this was going on also in the mid-'80s.

Anyway, at that time, Graham Spanier was our provost. He was the son of a Holocaust survivor. And I do not know if Graham—I know that he knew about the problems that had befallen us back in the mid-'80s, when so many of us were targeted by hate mail, etcetera—how much that figured into his thinking. But I do know that his chief assistant was Mimi Orzech, and that at the very tail end of 1986, or the very beginning of 1987, he came to her and asked her to put together a committee to plan for observances of Holocaust Remembrance Week.

And already by this time—maybe I should go back in personal terms—I had already been teaching a course on the Holocaust. That course began, in a sense, back in 1980. And without drawing out the story too much, although to me at any rate it's very interesting and very vivid, I just took note of the fact that so many of the students I was teaching in Western Civ, dealing with modern Europe, were interested in the Holocaust. And I didn't feel that there was any course that really spoke to that interest. [1:00:03] And I knew something of the Holocaust; I knew something of the history of anti-Semitism. But I'll, yes, this was the case when—that American military history course that I taught at the University of Illinois, and that I'm still quite proud of—that, okay I didn't know much about it, so I learned a lot about it. I read a lot about it. I viewed documentaries about it, and I started teaching. I taught it for the first time in 1982, under the auspices of our honors program. This was before we had an honors college. I taught it fairly regularly after that, and each time it improved.

And anyway, in January 1987, Mimi had been charged with putting together this committee. I was one of the ones that she invited to join. And we had our first program in April 1987. It was comparatively simple. I remember that we made—one of the things we did was we had an exhibit of posters relative to the Holocaust, that had been sent by the Holocaust Memorial Museum, even though the building did not yet exist, so I guess we can say the Holocaust Memorial Council, it would have been then. A very simple program, but one we were quite pleased with. And Graham made it quite clear that so long as he was at OSU, we could by all means make that an annual thing, and we did so.

I should add that even before this, every year, and particularly in every spring, Hillel would do something by way of observance of the Holocaust. So this was not the first time that there were activities having to do with Holocaust remembrance, but now it was more a university thing. And anyway, I have been involved ever since. I am the only charter member of that committee who is still on the committee, and when Mimi retired from OSU in 1993, I became the chair of the Holocaust Committee. Also around that time Graham left, so we had to look for a new home. We had originally been working out of the Provost's Office, and we now moved into the College of Liberal Arts, and then the Department of History. We moved along in that direction.

But we have the same philosophy that we've had from the beginning, and this is to try to incorporate as wide a range of people into our audiences as possible. I mean, this is something that I suppose our primary audience is OSU students, but then I can say and faculty, and townspeople. They're very important. Mimi Orzech always talked about a town and gown program.

MD: Hm.

PK: And this is central to our philosophy. We also work a lot with area schools. The committee regularly includes administrators or teachers from School District 509-J. And it has been a pleasure, and endlessly exhilarating, to be able to work with this program. And all through it, I've gotten to see some of the finest Holocaust scholars, and get to meet them [1:04:59], hear what they have to say—huge names. But in addition, I've gotten to meet so many survivors.

MD: Yes.

PK: That's really ultimately the core; that's what one looks for. But in any case, we still have our early philosophy. There are programs that we have that we sponsor, that actually take place off campus, to emphasize the fact, and it is a fact, that this is really for the general community, and not just for OSU. We encourage programs in the public schools, and not just in Corvallis but sometimes in Albany, Lebanon, etcetera. So we really try to involve this part of the state.

MD: Well, that's one of the things I was always wondering. You've met so many scholars, and survivors, and significant figures of the history of the Holocaust. Who stands out most over the years? Can you pin a couple down? Any special relationships that have come from that?

PK: Gosh. I guess one story that I particularly like involves two Auschwitz survivors who—I don't know when they met each other; it was a long, long, long after the war, but by that time they were living in Portland, and they both became active in speaking up there. And I got to know them, and encouraged them to come down here and speak to the schools. And one of them also spoke on campus. And one of them is still alive; the other one unfortunately passed away about a year ago. But anyway, I would set it up so that they would—each of them would speak. They would come down here. They would drive down together, and each of them would speak in two schools in this area.

And I still remember once, oh, gosh, about 10 or 12 years ago, I met them when they came back. We rendezvoused at Corvallis High School. And I asked them how their time had gone, how their talks had gone. They said, "Very well." But one said, "But Paul, we just can't be doing this. This is too difficult, having to give two talks in a day, and of course we have to drive from and up to Portland. It's just too much." And I nodded sympathetically, and I said, "I'm really sorry about how hard this is for you." And we talked on for a little while, then I said, "Can I count on you for next year?" And they said, "Of course."

MD: [Laughs]

PK: That is the spirit. Survivors are so special. They are very special people. And so when I think of people I've met through Holocaust Memorial Week, I first and foremost think of survivors, and really I can think of two dozen or more who—and each with a distinct personality. [Interruption] Okay, so many of my most vivid memories and fondest memories are of the survivors I've met. [1:10:00] Very much individuals, from, "Hail fellow, well met," to some who understandably are still overwhelmed by what they went through. And I suppose it's a very close thing, but in a way I admire them the most, because it's not easy for them.

MD: Oh, yeah.

PK: I mean, it is literally painful. And yet they speak out of this sense of duty, and they have incredible self-discipline. As for the scholars, well, we've been very lucky in this respect. We've had some of the biggest names in Holocaust studies dating back to—if I had to mark off a year when the program really just shot ahead, it would be 1990, when Christopher Browning came and spoke here. This was before he published his most famous book, *Ordinary Men*, a study of the Holocaust perpetrators. But he had done his research for it. He had written part of it, and he gave us a sneak preview as to what he was going to say in the book. That was an incredible experience.

I mean, so many top-flight people—Lawrence Langer. When he spoke here in 1993, he had done some incredible work with archival footage, with videos of survivors giving their stories. He, perhaps more than anyone, viewing hundreds and hundreds of these video tapes, and weaving them into narratives that are just unmatched. And he gave a talk that was I think the first one where visual aids were used, at least used extensively. He melded together clips from a number of interviews with Holocaust survivors, and spoke from them. Interestingly, I guess the one I remember most was of a husband and wife. Both of them were survivors, and they were being interviewed the same day. They were seated on a couch, but they were looking away from each other. Each was caught in his or her own story, and didn't seem to want to share it with the spouse, maybe fearing that it would somehow be too painful. But anyway, that talk was just incredible.

And I could go on, and on, and on with those who've spoken about the Holocaust—when we had Robert J. Lipton here in 1996 to speak about the Nazi doctors, he who had written the ultimate work on the Nazi doctors, entitled, *The Nazi Doctors*.

MD: [Laughs]

PK: That was just fantastic. We've had many, many top-flight speakers, famous speakers. But I'd also like to mention that as the committee and I see it, our program is certainly not just about the Holocaust. It's about the Holocaust, yeah, but in the context of the history of genocide, particularly the recent history of genocide, which unfortunately is a very considerable history. [1:15:02] And whereas, if one were to question students at Oregon State, or frankly at any university, and ask them if they had heard of the Holocaust, undoubtedly most of them would have, and they could at least say, "Well, it had something to do with the Jews, and there was this guy Hitler."

MD: Yeah.

PK: They might not know much about it, but they would know something about it. If one were to ask them about the Armenian genocide, or about the Cambodian genocide, chances are they would just stare blankly. And that's not a fault of theirs, it's a fault of our education, the education that we provide them, that there is this sense, well, genocide is a one-time thing. It happened to the Jews and that was too bad. But the problem with looking at it that way is young people are going to say, "Well, it happened just once. That was a long time ago, and so we don't have to worry about it."

MD: Yeah.

PK: Whereas those of us who know more realize that the 20th century, and heading into the 21st, has been really an age of genocide. So what we try to do in the Holocaust program year after year is to devote at least part of it to some other episode of genocide, or at least to the broader issue of genocide, and get away from focus on the Holocaust itself. We've had some wonderful events in association with this.

MD: Yeah, yeah.

PK: The Armenian genocide—there we've had two of the finest scholars, I mean where really, if you were to go to an expert and say, "Okay, whom should we invite to speak about the Armenian genocide?," these two names would be at the top of the heap. Okay, they've both spoken here. We've had excellent programs also on the Cambodian genocide. We had a wonderful talk a few years ago about the Great Congolese War, which in a sense was an assemblage of genocides. And we had a very interesting program a few years ago, a young scholar speaking about assaults on a small Native American tribe in California, the Tolowa, who were so decimated by a series of massacres in the 1850s, so of course, we had our genocides as well.

In any case, this is something that we try to do constantly, to make particularly younger people a bit more aware of the breadth of the issue of genocide, and perhaps come out with some answers. I mean, that's what one looks to the rising generation for, but at least we can help them sense what the problem is.

MD: Awareness is such a big part of that.

PK: Mm-hm.

MD: I mean, the Holocaust Memorial Week, in its history here at OSU, I mean, it's nationally, if not internationally, known. Are you kind of attached to that in a way, to where when people think of Holocaust Week here at OSU, does your name come up as the noted scholar, like you're talking about with these other folks?

PK: Well, I really do like to think of the Holocaust Program as a team effort. A lot of the events that we have come up with are not anything that I had thought of, but colleagues on the committee or outside of the committee just make a suggestion. We're always interested in suggestions. At the moment I think we have a fairly long list of things we want to do, with events we want to have, speakers we want to have. Of course, there's also the issue of raising the money to make this happen, but that's another part of it. [1:20:00] I honestly like to just—maybe I'm first among some; that's what it comes down to.

I make it my business to become known by all of our speakers, so possibly they do leave town thinking of me. I won't say that all this translates to fame. It really shouldn't. But mainly what I like to do is, okay, I am very proud of the achievement of our Holocaust program. And I still remember, gosh, back around 1995, so a while back, when we had Marion Catlin, fine historian who had done a lot of work on Jewish women in Nazi Germany before the Holocaust, in

other words, before the outbreak of the Second World War, but in the Nazi period, and how they coped. In fact, that's what she spoke on when she was here.

But I remember having dinner with her, and talking about how our program was organized, and how we tried to serve a broad constituency, but in terms of elements, so we had our programs for the schools, or programs for the general community, etcetera, etcetera. But anyway, I told her this and she said, "Boy, we don't have anything like that back where I'm from." And she was from New York City. I mean, not that they don't have Holocaust programs in New York City. Obviously, they do have. But in terms of this integration, and thinking in terms of the different elements in the local community, and trying to cater to all of them, I think that makes our program very special.

Also of course, we do try—in recent years we've been able to share even more broadly, because we now have, ever since 1990—in fact Christopher Browning was one of the first—ever since 1990 we have been videotaping many of our speakers, and now we are in the process of providing these videotapes online. And some of the early ones are not in great shape, but we've become better and better at this, and that's great, because so many of our talks have been fantastic, and now we can truly share them with a national and international audience.

MD: That's an incredibly important technological advance that oral histories has been taking advantage of, and with the quality of our program here with the Holocaust Memorial Week, being able to share that with other institutions, sharing it with Birmingham, Alabama, or sharing it with Anchorage, Alaska. It's incredible. I mean, that's probably, I don't know, a legacy that you should feel pretty good about.

PK: Oh, I absolutely feel great about it. I do feel we have certainly accomplished infinitely more than could be anticipated by anyone, and of course, myself, back in 1987 when we got our start. This really has grown and flourished, and I am extremely proud of the program. I think it has done its work very well, and yet I can also see things that we still need to do, events that we still need to hold, and speakers that we still need to bring here.

MD: Oh, yeah. It's an ongoing process, never letting this go. [1:25:00] Well, your career here at Oregon State, I mean, it spans three and a half decades. You've seen a lot of changes; you've done a lot of things. You've created many, many students that have gone on to other areas in history, such as myself.

PK: Mm-hm.

MD: What do you see as the biggest changes in 35 years, and what, most importantly, has remained the same?

PK: Hm. [Sighs] What has remained the same is the students here are a really nice bunch. They're people I like working with and working for. I think this is tremendously important. I don't like walking into a class at the start of the term and seeing signs that the students really don't want to be there. Maybe it says find baccalaureate core option for them, and it happened to fit their schedule, their boyfriend or girlfriend was taking it, whatever, but they don't want to be there. And they make that—with body language, they make that so apparent. And I don't see that too often. Yeah, I see it, but I don't see it—at least not on a regular basis. I think that our students are an amiable and amicable group, and that appeals to me. As I say, they're the sort of people that a teacher wants to work for, and does care about. So that's very positive, and it's not what one finds in every academic setting. So I'm pleased by that.

MD: Well, as a fellow past student of yours, I want to thank you for being such a dedicated teacher. And are there any extra words of wisdom from on high that you would like to impart to the Oregon State community?

PK: You mean, beyond take good lecture notes and read the books? It's kind of, care about the issues that are being raised in various courses, or that are just being raised in terms of current events. Be aware of what's going on in the world now. I mean, yes, of course, I do teach history, but we are sort of the outcome of history here. Pay attention to the world. I've got to say, I really—you asked me a while back about what has changed among students. Students can become too political and too politicized, basically, for their own good at university. But they can be too uninvolved as well.

I love to see students who display concerns for each other, and for some group that is, well, beyond them, that they will work for. And I mean, really, we have this series of communities that we can be a part of. I think it's very healthy to be a part of those. [1:30:00] I also think it's healthy to be tolerant of communities that we may not be a part of, but I think it is

important to have a sense of ourselves in the context of something bigger. And well, when you go back to the '60s, there was a lot that I'd have to say I don't remember fondly about now.

But college students, even though they tended to be coming from a kind of narrow perspective, and weren't, despite protestations otherwise, were not really very open-minded at all, at least in the context of what they believed, they were willing to work to learn. They did a lot of reading, a lot of listening, a lot of thinking. It was often rather narrowly based, but at least within that narrow base they were involved. I'm not sure I see as much of that now, and I think this is kind of unfortunate. I don't think that students are as aware of the wider world as they used to be. They don't know their current affairs. I hear news reporters going on and on, interpreting the various struggles in the Middle East, that region, in terms of conflict between the Shia and the Sunni, and then they just go on. I wonder how many students here could talk intelligently about the differences between these two branches of Islam. I don't think many could. I certainly don't think many could provide a sense of the history.

And yet here they are in a complex and difficult world, and I don't think they know enough. I honestly believe that students used to be better informed. But again, I'll tell you, that goes back to the "in my day" kind of thing, and I really shouldn't go there. But I do feel that students should try reaching out and try learning about issues, and the basis, the background to those issues.

MD: Well, Dr. Kopperman, this has been indeed an honor to be able to have you impart some wisdom of the years from the History Department, and on behalf of the Special Collections and Archive Research Center and Oregon State University, we thank you for your years of service and for this time today.

PK: Well thank you very much. [1:33:41]