

Timuel Black

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Leah Cohen: Well thank you, thank you so much.

Zenobia Black¹: Okay and Tim, remember your French Legion of Honor Award.

Leah Cohen: Well, so good afternoon. Today is September 14th 2020. My name is Leah Cohen. Sorry, I'm hearing a lot of background noise. I'm not sure what to do about that ... Oh, that's okay!

Hello and welcome. My name is Leah Cohen. I'm speaking to you, have the honor of speaking to you on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library and I'm very pleased to interview educator, political activist, community leader, oral historian, Mr. Timuel Black. Additionally, Mr. Black served in the US Army in the 308th Quartermaster Corps, popularly known as the Red Ball Express, which landed on Utah Beach just a few days after D-Day during World War II. So I hope we can do justice to your life, but you are the first person I'm speaking to who's [also] an oral historian so well, I'm here to listen and to learn.

Timuel Black: Well I did, I was drafted and didn't volunteer for World War II and recently received a medal of honor from the French government on my 100th birthday. I was a *participant*, not a combat but a service unit that went from Normandy in England to all the way to Buchenwald in Germany, which was an extermination camp. Now we were also, though we were not combat troops we were a service unit, but subject to attack more in many ways [in order] to cut off the supplies to the combat units. And so we were in the *areas* of combat all the way from Normandy up through Buchenwald into Germany, and that was a terrifying experience

¹ Mr. Black's wife.

for all of us, including the combat as well as the non-combat supply unit. Now it's very difficult maybe for you younger people to understand what I'm talking about, but if you go back and talk with your older relatives whatever their background, maybe they will give you some similar stories about that period of time economically, politically, and all other elements of human behavior. So I feel obligated to personalize and talk about it, but I don't claim to be the only person, though at age 101 years and nine months, soon to be 102, I feel that I should share as much as I can of my experience during that period.

Leah Cohen: Mr. Black, I know that you've written about it and have been interviewed a lot about it, but would you like to talk about your background. Like when you were born, [when] the families moved to Chicago and so on?

Black: Well, I was born, this was December 7th 1918. That's also historically Pearl Harbor Day, later in 1941 [laughs]. Later my family brought my brother and sister and I, my mother and father in November, well, early November of 1919, right after the race riot in Chicago of 1919 and one would ask, "Why did they leave where they were in Birmingham?" But at that period of time, the urban Blacks fled the South because they were encouraged to come North to not only be able to fight back against the Ku Klux Klan with some degree of... but also to be able to vote and they did, to be able to get better education for their children, and they did. These were urban blacks, like my father, worked right outside of Birmingham, Alabama where I was born, in the steel mill, Bessemer Steel², he and others like him in the urban South were encouraged to come North, not only by the founder of the *Chicago Defender*³, Robert Abbott⁴, "Come North, young man!" and telling the story of how much better it was in the North than his family had experienced, though they were never in slavery. My grandparents had all been enslaved and then after the Emancipation Proclamation, they became indentured servants and my mother and father had been indentured servants before they left the South.

So that was the First Great Migration of Blacks, but Blacks had served in World War I and though they were not combat[ants] by American standards, they were part of the French army, Marshal Foch, and Marshal

² The first inexpensive process for the mass production of steel, named for its patent holder, Henry Bessemer, in 1856.

³ Founded by Abbot in 1905, the *Defender* was one of the first and most important Black newspapers in the US. It still exists as an online journal.

⁴ Robert Abbott, 1870-1940, pioneering Black publisher, editor, and lawyer.

Pétain⁵ were their commanding officers and they were experienced in combat. And so though my father, he had many friends who had been in World War I and then when World War II came into being, he could but feel sad and fear the realities, he, and my mother, about the stories that had been told to them by their friends and relatives of World War I. So there was a continuation though, there were Blacks in Chicago and other big cities who were volunteering through various agencies, like the schools had ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps]. There were registered officers to train them to be soldiers in New York, Chicago, Detroit and other big cities. There were those of us who didn't want to be in the Army at all. The Tuskegee Airmen, however, were young men, friends of many friends of mine, who volunteered.

Cohen: Mr. Black, would you happen to have known Coleman T Holt? Our [Oral History] Program was named after him and I know that he had been in the Tuskegee Airmen, and of course there were many. I just wondered if by coincidence you knew him or knew of him?

Black: What was the name again?

Cohen: Coleman Holt: H-O-L-T.

Black: I remember the name but I'm not sure that I knew him personally. Now there were others that I did know, like Earl Strayhorn⁶, who became a prominent person in political life, and others that were younger—like my brother knew them—but I remember the name, but I didn't, I can't remember any relationship. But the Tuskegee Airmen were young men who had been prepared to fly to fight and fight but they were not accepted until the President's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, went to Tuskegee and told one of the airmen, "Let's go up", and that airman took her up and the racial line was broken, and those young men went to Europe and they were in combat areas. And I knew this from my own experiences in ... [unclear] and it—most of the time, and though they were volunteers to be in combat when they were on the ground, *race still matters*.

⁵ Ferdinand Foch and Phillipe Pétain were both marshals of France in 1918. The latter gained notoriety in WW2 as leader of the fascist Vichy state after the German invasion.

⁶ The Hon. Earl Strayhorn held several posts in the state judiciary, was a member of the NAACP, and taught law at Harvard, among many major institutions. He died in 2009, at age ninety, leaving behind a considerable body of academic work and rulings.

Cohen: One thing you mentioned in your book, *Sacred Ground*, was that your father asked you, “Why join the US Army when there's protests against the inequalities in Detroit and New York City?” What was ... you also mentioned earlier that it was just hard, disheartening for him to see the same prejudice against African-Americans in World War II as in World War I. What had your father said to you when he knew you were drafted?

Black: We were ... though we felt the rejection, we were still American, and we were proud of the fact that we could defend, be a part of the American effort at that time, to be in combat. I tell a little story, when we were in Europe, France, Belgium and that, separation still exists in a subtle way. There was a desire on the part of the British [and] French to separate Blacks psychologically, according to race. They would ask us, and I personally experienced that, “Why do we see Negro soldiers under White officers and we never see White soldiers on the Negro officers?” I didn't respond to them, but my feelings came up and pardon the vulgarity, but I said to myself, “It ain't none of your goddamn business! We're gonna straighten this shit out when we get home!” [laughter] That was an attitude that was shared universally by Americans, African-Americans, who were in the Army whether they were volunteers or drafted. Now that laid the base for those, and our White friends by the way, who felt similar, and I had a lot of friends who [did] ... We returned home with a commitment that we were going to make a change in race. That was the beginning, psychologically, of the civil rights movement.

Cohen: Yeah, that was very profound.

Black: You understand what I'm trying to say?

Cohen: Yes. It's very profound and I never made the connection before between World War II and the beginning of the civil rights as a movement.

Black: We were American; we had been told that, “We hold these truths to be self-evident” and we included ourselves, “All *human beings* are created equal” and we were determined, in spite of the segregation in the Army,

we were determined to make American life move towards that expression of the Declaration of Independence.

Cohen: Yes, to genuinely fulfill the Declaration of Independence ...

Black: Yes, “we hold these truths to be self-evident” and then of course the Revolutionary War and later to break the ties with England and then later, the Civil War in which Blacks voluntarily were part of the Army against the Confederates and were embraced by Abraham Lincoln, with the help of Blacks who helped him think of about how, and he issued the Emancipation Proclamation as an executive order that emancipated legally the serf.

Cohen: Yes, jumping back a little bit. Would you like to talk about growing up in the South Side? You mentioned in the book [*Sacred Ground*] what a sense of community it was. You also talk about the importance of education that your mother conveyed to you. Would you like to jump back to your personal history a little bit, please?

Lack: Well, the Blacks who fled the South in roughly the beginning of World War I till the beginning of World War II, that *fled* the South, they were somewhat urbanized and had seen and wanted to participate in political activities and so they brought skills and desires to the North, they brought *political* skills. It was regular conversation on the street, for parents to ask other parents, “Did you vote yet?” And then they would brag about their children in school, like my brother. He was a brilliant guy, he was going to Tillman Technical school, where he was segregated but was a captain on the basketball team, and that's another kind of story that was true. And though there was an agreement called ‘restrictive covenants’, which was an agreement between landlords and landowners that they would not writ or sell to the Blacks. And so in that *ghetto*—as Robert Abbott coined it, the ‘Black Belt’⁷ corner, there was a will to create, because of the talent and the desire, there was a creation of parallel institutions, parallel economics.

I never worked outside the Black Belt until I went to college. “You ‘d better hire me, or we would put you out of business”; “Don't spend your

⁷ Black area in Chicago, established like a canton by property developers and City Hall power: boundaries were 12th and 79th by North & South; Wentworth and Cottage Grove streets, East, and West, the South Side of the city, roughly.

money where you can't work." That was an attitude that was universal in the Black Belt. Parallel, the parallel cultural institutions. Well, we can speak of something that became pretty popular: Jazz music, with Louis Armstrong⁸ and Bessie Smith⁹ and Mamie Smith¹⁰ and we youngsters were, though we lived on the outside almost of the Black Belt—not quite, but close to it—we were taken by our parents to hear this music. Gospel music, spirituals ... 'I'm So Glad That Trouble Won't Last Always'¹¹, that was a *spirituality* that we shared. So culturally, economically, and politically in Chicago, the first Black congressman after Reconstruction, a man by the name of Oscar De Priest¹², was the first Black congressman after Reconstruction. And so with those parallel institutions, we younger people had images and inspiration and almost *demands* that we be successful. Almost all of us in that First Great Migration graduated at least from high school and about ninety-nine of our children went on to some college.

Leah Cohen: Wow ...

Timuel Black: And the demand, the prestigious demand, was if you qualify, try to go to one of the White colleges because that's the proof, it was competitive, socially competitive because the Black colleges offered quality education but my mother, when my brother was given a scholarship—he had scholarships all over back then—but when he was given, offered a scholarship to go to the University of Illinois, Champaign Urbana, my mother, who dictated [laughter], like most mothers, we had no choice! [laughter] Mama would say, "Go to school, Boy." And Dad would say, 'Do what your Mama says, Boy' [laughs]... Mama said, "Boy...!" So we had no choice. [laughter] So my brother, my mother when my brother

⁸ Louis Armstrong, 1901-1971. One of the greatest musicians of the 20th Century. Band leader, composer, trumpet player and vocalist. His importance can never be overestimated.

⁹ Bessie Smith, 1894-1937. Great jazz vocalist and stylist nicknamed the 'Empress of the Blues'. She is of crucial importance in the history of American music, both in terms of influence and innovation.

¹⁰ Mamie Smith, 1891-1946. Sometimes called the first Black singer to make vocal blues recordings. Smith had a background in vaudeville and appeared in several films. Her early discs with the Okeh labels sold upwards of a million copies.

¹¹ Mr. Black refers to the great gospel song of this title, perhaps first recorded in 1923 by Mama Hurd Fairfax. The most famous version is probably that of the great Sam Cooke and the Soul Stirrers. It is still frequently recorded.

¹² Oscar Stanton De Priest, 1871-1951, American politician, and civil rights advocate from Chicago, born in Ohio. He was the first Black American politician to be elected to Congress in the 20th century. He was also the first Black Representative (Republican) from outside of the Southern states.

received this scholarship—and he had other scholarships too—he received the scholarship to the University of Illinois, Champaign, my mother [said], “You know. Walter’s going to the University of Illinois!” and that put her in a more prestigious place. It was really competitive, and education was a part of that social and cultural factor, the politics exemplified by Oscar De Priest and later others, and also in the cultural [factor], music: Jazz, Blues, Gospel and those forms of music that were unique.

Now most of those, and I know this is as a person, most of those earlier musicians had formal training in classical music but they could not be a part of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, so they took their talents into the community. And Fess Williams¹³ and all kinds of training musicians were their leaders. And they went on and such a guy like Nat ‘King’ Cole¹⁴, who sat right in back of me at Phillips and Du Sable High School, he could, his whole family were musicians, and we can track that—I’m just using him as an example. Captain Walter Henri’s Dyett¹⁵, if you went to Phillips and Du Sable High School, made his students be good musicians. He was a classical musician, but also demanded them to continue their formal education and so he had connections with musicians at school like Howard Bisk and all those other schools where he could say to the leader, “I’m gonna send him here or I’m gonna send her here”, and so Dorothy Donegan¹⁶ and Dinah Washington¹⁷ and those people who became nationally well-known were part of his grooming. But they had the background in terms of the music, but they had the inspiration in terms of their family and the guidance in terms of teachers.

Cohen: Which schools did you go to?

¹³ Stanley R “Fess” Williams, 1894-1975, clarinetist, best known for founding the hot jazz outfit the Royal Flush Orchestra in 1926. He was the uncle of the great Charles Mingus. Williams’ family was a musical dynasty, but he also received formal training at Tuskegee University and is thus the perfect illustration of Mr. Black’s point. Likewise Nat King Cole.

¹⁴ Nat ‘King’ Cole, 1919-1965; Jazz composer, pianist, vocalist, and actor. Some of the greatest records of the period were made by the King Cole Trio. Though extremely successful across the divide of ‘race’ records, he still faced crushing racism and even physical attacks at White gigs, like all Black artists of the time.

¹⁵ Walter Henri Dyett, 1901-1969, musician and instructor in Chicago Public schools. His students at Du Sable and Phillips read like a roll call of the greatest artists in American 20th Century music: Gene Ammons, Nat King Cole, Bo Diddley, Johnny Griffith, Von Freeman, Dorothy Donegan, Johnny Harman, Joseph Jarman, LeRoy Jenkins, Dinah Washington, Redd Foxx...

¹⁶ Dorothy Donegan, 1922-1998, pianist and vocalist. She was equally at home playing bebop or Rachmaninoff.

¹⁷ Dinah Washington, born Ruth Lee Jones, 1924-1963, singer and pianist. Considered one of the greatest jazz vocalists of all time.

Black: Well, I graduated from Burke Elementary School and the library there is named after me now. I graduated in 1932 and I went to, with some of my friends, to Englewood High School. My father worked at the stockyards at the time, the steel mill. That was not considered among Blacks “middle class” and so at Englewood, they did not want Blacks, though most of the White students were stockyards, their fathers were stockyards and steel mill, but the teacher would ask the Black students, “Where does your father work?” Now, at that time, most jobs were male, White or Black. The mother or the wife might be as well or better trained academically: She was a housewife, unless she was single. So when the teachers, they didn't want Blacks at Englewood though the Blacks who were acceptable were academically better trained than Whites.

Leah Cohen: Yeah ...

Timuel Black: But they would ask people like me—my brother had been to Englewood and then transferred himself to Tillman and therefore he became a quality basketball [player], that's another story—a big story. The teacher would ask me, “Where does your father work?” And I would say, “The stockyards.” And everybody began to laugh, so I began to be uh ... began to hang out with the wrong guys [laughs] and the principal, I was brought to the principal of the school and he said, “Bring your, one of your parents up so I can tell them how to handle you.” I brought my father. Now he did not know that my father was a Black nationalist, attitudinally, who had his heroes. It was uh, I'm trying to think of the creator of the—pardon my memory, he [Mr. Black Sr] was a Garveyite—he was...Marcus Garvey¹⁸ was his inspiration with his Back to Africa attitude. So my father, so he didn't know my father had to make, like many men of that [generation] ... [had to] make many adjustments. And we used to have parties at my house, where the men would come and talk about how they had adjusted to be able, so they never forgot, they adjusted to the White dominant group on economics, but they never forgot that they were Negroes, *Negras*, as we were called.

Well anyway, my father was like that, my father came up and the principal of the school at that time, this is 1933, 1934, the principal of the school was telling my father how he should treat this unruly child. When he finished my dad said, “Look, you don't tell me how to treat my

¹⁸ Marcus Mosiah Garvey, 1887-1940, born in Jamaica. Political activist, orator, writer, entrepreneur, publisher and intellectual. He is best known for his proposal and initiatives to repatriate all Black people back to Africa, Black separatism, and his pioneering Black-owned business works. He remains an influential, fascinating, divisive, and very important figure in American history. Garveyite movements, of many different stripes, continue to this day.

children!" I know, now I know I'm gonna get a whipping or a spanking [laughs] when I get home but, "You don't tell me how to treat my children! I know how to do that." So I made up my mind, with my dad's blessing, that I was no longer going to be a student in Englewood High School, so I forged my mama's name and transferred to Wendell Phillips [High School]. Now in a *class* situation, Englewood, though the academics were not as well or good, was not considered as classy—I mean *Phillips* was not—though the students, Black students, were coming from middle class families, most of them. That's when I met at Nat King Cole, by the way, he came from a middle class [family]. The church where [Dr Martin Luther] King started the civil rights movement, I forget the church name¹⁹, his family who was a part of that—[Nat] King Cole's family—was a participant in that before they came [to Chicago]. So I forged my mama's name and went to transfer to Wendell Phillips. Best decision that I ever made because I met such people as Nat King Cole, John H Johnson²⁰, the publisher and founder of *Ebony* magazine and others like them; Dempsey Travis²¹ and many others like and so ... and Mary Herrick, our teacher who was a tremendous inspiration, Mary Herrick, a White lady.

Leah Cohen: What did she, what did she do that was inspiring as a teacher?

Timuel Black: She was hooked up ... she and Captain Dyett hooked up with one another. Mary Herrick, and also by that time, Carter G Woodson²² ... [mic distortion] no, when Carter G Woodson, the library at 48th [Street] right around, had just opened because of the demand of this concentration of Black power. And so the librarian was Vivian Harsh²³--and now there's a library unit named for her at the Carter G Woodson library—Miss Harsh

¹⁹ Mr. Black refers to the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Montgomery, AL. It is now named after The Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church.

²⁰ John H Johnson, 1918-2006, publisher and businessman. The Johnson Publishing Co. is still headquartered in Chicago. Best known for the *Ebony*/*Jet* line of Black cultural magazines.

²¹ Dempsey Jerome Travis, 1920-2009, civil rights activist, real estate entrepreneur (he worked to combat the displacement of black due to racist urban renewal projects), historian, and author. Among other things, he was a member of the NAACP and helped coordinate Dr King's historic march in Chicago, July 24 1960.

²² Carter G Woodson, 1875-1950, Black historian, author, journalist and academic, often called 'the father of Black history'. He was one of the first scholars to seriously study the African American diaspora. He also launched the precursor of Black History Month, among other initiatives. There are many institutions named after Mr. Woodson around the country, including the library in Chicago which Mr. Black refers to.

²³ Vivian Harsh, 1890-1960, was the Chicago Public Library's first Black librarian. The unit named for her honor which Mr. Black refers to houses not only his papers but those of Richard Wright, among many others.

and Miss Herrick had a common goal. Miss Herrick would have the students but send them to this library at 48th [Street] right around the corner and Ms. Harsh would demand that they not only be serious about using the library. So there was a unity. Miss Herrick who lived—by the way, was one of the persons who the broke the barrier, the sex barrier on women teaching at the high school level, that helped to create the Chicago Teachers Union, she wasn't married but she didn't waste her time. We were her children in terms of her feelings and so Miss Herrick was also an inspiration among other teachers, but she was outstanding herself. In fact, we have a scholarship, a Mary Herrick scholarship fund that goes on. And so we were exposed very early to Adolf Hitler historically, and to, uh the Italian leader²⁴, but Adolf Hitler *early*. And Miss Herrick and Miss Harsh would provide opportunities for us to hear Adolf Hitler and the Italian, I forget [his name] right away ... And we heard and we would go home, on the radio would also, and the translation from German and Italian to English. And at the end of every speech that we heard, Adolf Hitler would say, “Deutschland, Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles²⁵: ‘Germany, Germany over all!’”

Leah Cohen: Wow!

Timuel Black: So we, who were the children of slaves, could personalize that. That's another factor that made us so pro-American and we felt that the “Germany, Germany over all” was equivalent to slavery: that was the experience. So when we went into World War II, we carried that feeling with us: if we don't beat this SOB, we will be slaves again and we carried that spirituality that was transferred even today: that if we don't do certain things, “Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles!” would rule. So Germany made us obligated to be American. Do you understand?

Leah Cohen: I do, I do. I heard there was a little glitch, there was a technical glitch but no, I understand very well. It's like a realization of that under a wrong dictatorship, things could go back to a situation of slavery and that maybe there was also empathy, as well.

²⁴ Mr. Black means the Fascist Benito Mussolini, here and after, ‘the Italian [leader]’.

²⁵ The words were taken from an old hymn by composer Joseph Haydn and bastardized by the National Socialists to promote ultra-nationalism.

Timuel Black: That was inspirational for those of us who participated in World War I, the Spanish-American War ... World War I and World War II.

Leah Cohen: Um you, you also—

Timuel Black: Since I wasn't in either the Spanish-American War or World War, I can transfer it back into World War II ...

Leah Cohen: Well, as you can tell from my name, I'm obviously a Jew, so one thing I was curious about was you said that at the time, either at the edges of the Black Belt or nearby, there were there was contact with Jews who were either living or owning little businesses nearby and I wonder what that was like for you, as an African American? And I believe you mentioned [in your memoir, *Sacred Ground*, that] you had worked for a drugstore part-time, for a pharmacy part-time, that was owned by a Jew and [I was] just wondering about-- if you'd like to elaborate on that?

Leah Cohen: Well, most of the ... when Blacks moved into the ... Now if one travels through the old Black Belt, they will wonder, “Why did these people leave this nice housing?” It was not shacks. These were middle [class], had been housed by middle class Irish Catholics and Jewish middle class, not the Jewish people on the West Side²⁶ or the Irish, the shanty type of Irish [laughs] and uh, you know there was a division there also that needs to be understood. And so the only people in small businesses who remained—there was big business, A & P, Atlantic & Pacific²⁷ is consumer and all but—were Jewish and Chinese. Chinese laundries, Chinese restaurants, and the Jewish And I had been to school the early days of Edmond Burke School with the children of those owners; Chinese and Jewish, so when those, when the ‘restrictive covenants’ were broken, Blacks began to move out because the [area became] overcrowded. The

²⁶ The descendants of German Jews who had migrated to Chicago in the 1830s and thereabouts moved to the South Side after they prospered. However as Black states only fewer Jewish families running small businesses had remained in the area during his childhood. In contrast, the Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe, which began at the turn of the 20th century established themselves on the West Side.

²⁷ The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co., an early chain of American grocery stores that operated from 1859 to 2015. It was the largest grocery retailer in the country from 1915-1975; until 1965, it was the largest retailer of any kind in the country. It declared bankruptcy in 2015.

population density was another story; the population density in the Black Belt was three to four times bigger than the adjoining communities, say 20,000 per square mile in Hyde Park and Woodlawn; 60 to 70,000 to families.

Now because the families in the first Great Migration who fled the South, they were urban, they seldom had more than two children or three children. If someone had more than that, my mother would say, “How are they gonna pay for them?” Well, Blacks that ... they were rearing us to not be working but to go to school, whereas the agricultural armor, the children were worth something because they could pick cotton and tobacco and so they were seldom given an opportunity to go to school. Now an example of that comes when I was in the [US] Army and I had never seen young men or boys that couldn't read or write but they could shoot [laughs]. So that was ... [laughs] and they knew they were being deprived and when they came out of the Army, they went back to school and such.

But the point that I'm trying to answer is the culture of that neighborhood. Now when Mr. Hansberry²⁸, when Lorraine Hansberry's father²⁹ took his *second* case—now, he's being helped by the white friends—*Hansberry v. Lee*, to break the restrictive covenants, and my mother and father moved into North Woodlawn—Woodlawn, roughly from 60th street on the north, to 63rd on the south from Cottage; the west side of Cottage Grove on the east to Wentworth Avenue on the west—that's the restriction that we had on the South Side. Now when Mr. Hansberry took his first case, the way in which Mr. Hansberry was able to arrive; he took his first case to this courts in Chicago, and I tell my Jewish friends this all the time with a joke, the case went to court because Mr. Hansberry—that's another story—was a wealthy man alright. He would have his white friends buy a piece of property in the segregated neighborhood, sell it to him and then he would sell it to one of the Blacks.

So it was slow when he took his first case, the case was used by the University, in the case when he went to court, the judge who ruled that

²⁸ Lorraine Hansberry, 1930-1965, famous Black playwright. Her most well-known work is *A Raisin in the Sun*, based on her family's terrible experiences moving into an all-white neighborhood in Chicago and the racist attacks and persecution they suffered because of it. These events are what Mr. Black will refer to.

²⁹ Carl Augustus Hansberry, 1895-1946, real estate broker and political activist. He also ran an unsuccessful for Congress. He died in Mexico suddenly, where he had planned to emigrate with his family. *Hansberry v. Lee* case was in 1940.

restrictive covenants were not illegal or unconstitutional was a Jewish judge. And Mr. Hansberry ... And that opened this part that I've described about Woodlawn. Mr. Hansberry took another case, *Shelley ... Shelley v. Kraemer*³⁰, that dealt with restricted covenants *nationwide*. The judge in the first case was Jewish, University of Chicago Law School [laughs] and I used to kid my Jewish friends—and I do that with the Blacks too! [laughs]— It's not, it goes back ... Pardon me I'll insert this just for humor: when I was, when I was about four or five years old going to kindergarten, my mother had sent South for her mother who had been an ex-slave. And Grandma was a great person, she would ask every day, "What did you do ...", I'm using the Southern dialect, "What did you do in school today, Boy?" And so I tried because my brother was such a scholarly guy [laughter] and so one day I came home and I must have been playing with matches and Grandma said, "Boy, what you doing?" So with a belly of whiskey, old Grandma, this Grandma just didn't speak good English with me[laughter], I tried to explain to Grandma that I wasn't doing anything wrong. And Grandma said, "Boy, I can't hear what you're saying cause what you're doing talks so loud!" [laughter] Actions speak louder than words. So I judge people by their behavior, not by how they look and so my Jewish friends were embarrassed to know that the judge who ruled Mr. Hansberry had not been in his rights, had not been in line. So he took the second case to the Supreme Court of the United States and the justice who ruled, who read the ruling that that restrictive covenants were *not illegal*—

Leah Cohen: Were *not illegal*?

Timuel Black: Pardon?

Leah Cohen: Did you say that the judge ruled that the restrictive covenants were *not legal*?

Timuel Black; Nationwide. This is the national. The local had been overruled and the national had been overruled in the Supreme Court of the United States. The justice who read the majority decision was an ex-Ku Klux Klansman

³⁰ Decided in 1948.

by the name of Hugo Black³¹. Now Hugo Black—my name comes from the *Black* Hugo Black family! [laughter]. When my father who was, as I said he was a Garveyite, when Hugo Black—I was graduating from elementary school—when Hugo Black was nominated for the Supreme Court, I said. “Dad, did you know, they just nominated an ex-Ku Klux Klansman?!” Dad said, “Sure, he’ll be alright. “I said to myself, “God damn, my father has gone crazy!”, because I knew he was a Garveyite. Hugo Black turned out to be the most liberal justice on the Supreme Court. I get my let my first name and my last name, Timuel Black—Now, when I was teaching at Wright College on the northside, some of my White friends had demanded that they have Blacks in administration as well as teaching. So he went and looked up my first name, Timuel Dixon. And what he brought back to tell me was that Timuel meant in Yiddish [i.e., Hebrew], Child of God—

Leah Cohen: Oh like *Tam-El* maybe...³²

Timuel Black: Samuel, Immanuel, Timuel is a part of that. I was amazed that that was the case! [laughter] But Hugo Black apparently, had a Jewish background.

Leah Cohen: Aha. Well, what a story. [Laughs nervously]

Timuel Black: I tell the story because I want the listener, the viewers to understand the complications that come if you judge things purely by race. Hugo Black was more liberal and declined to segregate me [as a Black] than a Jewish judge in Chicago who followed the tradition—**Robert Hutchins**[<https://president.uchicago.edu/directory/robert-maynard-hutchins>Were you saying that Hutchin is Jewish He seems to be son of preachers.] . -who was the president, a liberal, almost a radical—supported restrictive covenants. He was the president of the University of Chicago at that time. You understand?

³¹ Hugo Lafayette Black, 1886-1971, lawyer, politician, and jurist. Served as Associate justice of the Supreme Court from 1937-1971.

³² Tam in Hebrew means complete, innocent (which could have the connotation of a child) while El is one of God’s names, also in Hebrew.

Leah Cohen: Yeah, I understand.

Timuel Black: What I carried with me, that my grandparent, my grandmother said, “Boy, I can't hear what you're saying because what you're doing talks so loud.” Actions speak louder than words. So judging people strictly about sex, race, gender, whatever and thinking that *that* person ... Why would Blacks and females be voting for the man who is now the president of the United States³³³?

Leah Cohen: Yes.

Timuel Black: [laughs] But they did and hopefully won't, since they judge his behavior now. But that is part of the growing up, the period of experience during the Great Depression. Though we lived in the Great Depression, we were seldom *depressed* because of culture, because of the culture that existed. And more upper middle-class *Whites* committed suicide during the Depression than any other minority group. All over the world, that's what laid the base for what became World War II.

Leah Cohen: That was one thing that impressed me, was that that it sounded like there was a lot of community helping of each other, and I got that from other interviews of World War II veterans, too. Like for example you mentioned that when your brother was accepted to the University of Illinois at Champaign, neighbors right away were asking, “What can I give you? How can I help?” I mean, do you feel that there was a lot of community informal help going on with the community?

Timuel black: With the community? With the Black Belt?

Leah Cohen: Yeah.

Timuel Black: Yeah, well they were they were inspirational in demanding that my brother set an example. That if you're prepared, the door is going to

³³³³ Mr. Black refers to Donald J Trump, who was president at the time of this interview.

open. If you're prepared to walk in, be ready. And of course we can transfer that today to the man who became the president of the United States. Yeah, the door was open; he was ready to walk in and that's true. *I can't hear what you're saying because what you're doing talks so loud.* "But never forget". My mother would say, "Don't forget where you came from. Adjust to what is, but don't forget where you came from." "And so we carry from the Civil War and other experiences, those who are fortunate as I happen to be, that belief and faith and as Frederick Douglass³⁴, who told Lincoln, "Free the slaves and win the war", Frederick Douglass said, "He who pays the fiddler calls the tune." Dr [Martin Luther] King could not be paid. Also, it's another level, but Tim Black cannot be paid. But as a result of people like Dr. King encouraging others that they have a responsibility, a change *racially* ... And Ida B Wells³⁵, and with the Black activists and Jane Adams³⁶, with the background of organizing women and others so that with Nineteenth Amendment, women can have the right to vote. They were offered all kinds of opportunities, but they wouldn't accept. Well, Tim Black has been offered, had been offered— too late now—a lot of things, if I would just stop being a troublemaker. But I'd rather make trouble. I have more fun [laughter].

As my parents early, and I say this in this general because my parents were part of the *general*, my daddy would say, "Mattie... " My mama wanted my brother and sister and I to act like middle-class Whites, and my dad who was—but they got along because they want their children to be ... they were never argumentative, they just disagreed with one another and I learned a lesson on how to do that because they loved one another, and that's another story—but Daddy said, "Mattie...", my mom always talked about dressing, dressing like the middle class children who wore a certain kind of coat, so Dad, who couldn't afford it because he wasn't making as much money as that: "Mattie, pay the rent, buy plenty of food," and he'd then laugh and say, "And get printed toilet paper." [laughter] I learned if you have those three items you can make more money, you know, you can be as independent as you want. You have the basics.

Leah Cohen: You do.

³⁴ Frederick Douglass, 1818-1896, the great Black reformer, writer, and statesman.

³⁵ Ida B Wells, 1862-1931, Black journalist, educator, and civil rights leader; one of the founders of the NAACP.

³⁶ Jane Adams, 1860-1935, Chicago reformer, suffragette, public administrator, and social worker.

Timuel Black: And so you can have more but don't forget your ancestry and also be protected by having your housing and your stomach and your backside taken care of! [laughter]. So I tell these stories, and you can challenge them as you wish, because I want to share with young people—of course - race, gender, and all the other lines—the idea that the “trouble don't last always, oh my Lord, oh my Lord, what shall I do...” and have the faith that the future is going to be different and positive whether the evidence indicates that or not. But have the faith that music gives the rhythm and the lyrics, that particular jazz that had keep us going. We used to walk down the street whistling ... jazz music, whistling to one another jazz music and laughing.

Leah Cohen: It has struck me too that you have a lot of optimism and a lot of faith in the future and in younger generations.

Timuel Black: That was the generation that my generation inspired because they could know that their older relatives had gone through those hard times. Jews were going, and you know their relatives were going ... I saw a Buchenwald, a concentration camp and many of my Jewish friends had lost relatives in that period, but they kept the faith of the future in the Warsaw songs³⁷ that was created during that period.

Leah Cohen: Yes, yes ...

Timuel Black: Yeah, well listen, I have been talking a long time, we're about running out of time. I hope what I've been talking about is worth your time.

³⁷ Mr. Black refers to the music created by Jews in the Warsaw ghetto and elsewhere in Europe during the Holocaust. “Zog nit Keynmol’ also known as the ‘Partisan Song”, is perhaps the most well-known example, later famously recorded by the great Black actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson. It was written in Yiddish by Hirsch Glick in the Vilna Ghetto in 1943, inspired by the Jewish Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. There are many more songs of resistance. One could characterize all music written under oppression, following Mr. Black’s lead, as songs of resistance.

Leah Cohen: It absolutely ... it's absolutely is worth my time and would you consider another interview with more questions, or you know or is this it, basically?

Timuel Black: No, you can come back. I feel obligated to help the younger people to feel the experience they ... See, almost all of us, because all of the lines can go back and talk with relatives and they have similar stories in different places. And that is what Grandma inspired in her dumb grandson: her experiences in slavery left her with a feeling of optimism carried on to my parents. And my mother and father didn't see it, but the door is going to open. Be prepared to walk in. And that's an optimism regardless to what may be happening. We were in the Great Depression as I said, but we were not *depressed*.

Now if you're separated from that kind of inspiration and information, then why should you care about anything and anyone? Today is the only day. But you don't because obligations inspired [you] and therefore we can. When you look at the backgrounds of most of the street criminals, they don't believe there's a future. Today is the only day. So they see you walking down the streets, they don't have any food to eat, they see you as an opportunity to have a meal—Go at it. So I've simplified, but that, behaviorally I can prove. So we look at who went into the Army, volunteered—I'm not talking about the higher level at West Point though—most of the young people in my unit were from the South and had experienced the segregation. Some of them had been in prison, released because they would be volunteers to go to into the Army.

Leah Cohen: I think it's all very good. If it would be possible to meet again and maybe go more into detail about your experience in the Army, that would be great. I don't want to be heavy, so should I speak to Zenobia to see if we could set up another interview or would that be ...

Timuel Black: Why don't you do that? She takes care of those kinds of things.

Leah Cohen Okay [laughs]

Timuel Black: My younger wife is same age as my daughter, but she's been an inspiration and help to her older husband [laughs].

Leah Cohen: [Laughs] But I feel that you have a young soul!

Timuel Black [Laughs] Okay, so you make the contact with Zenobia and she does have my calendar, so she'll know what's available. If you think I can be useful to your mission, I want to help people to carry ...

Leah Cohen: I feel you can. Our mission is to collect the stories, to have the historical context for the citizen soldier. And to be honest, I think we do need to hear from more African Americans who served. Like I have a friend who works here and who's Black and she said some of her friends have a certain reluctance, that they feel, it's maybe perceived in their minds as quote-unquote 'a White institution.' So I'm, just to say I feel it's important to have more interviews, for many different voices from the African American community. And the fact that you are a leader and have been a leader, I hope it will also inspire others to come forward. So all of us say, yes, it would be very valuable, yeah.

Timuel Black: I think so, yeah. Well, you make the contact with Zenobia.

Leah Cohen: I will, I will.

Timuel Black: I hope this particular event has been worth your time.

Leah Cohen: It has, it absolutely, it absolutely has. And thank you for really such an articulate interview and ... I don't know, it's just the right perspective on life altogether. [laughter]

Timuel Black: Oh yeah well that's what it's about. And I say to you younger people who talk with your older relatives, they have similar—maybe *different* but

there's similarities—of having a feeling that they have to stay well enough to save people like you. Don't be them, don't be no you! [laughter]. There's an obligation to the truth, to the future.

Leah Cohen: To the future ...

Timuel Black: And that's always. So that's the optimism. And World War II—and all wars as far as I'm concerned—war is an act of insanity. But you had to be there. But *World War II*, because of the new weapons and they are more dangerous now than they were then, made some of us feel that war is not the answer. We must find another way, because the weapon, the atomic weapon that was created on the campus of the University of Chicago, is now obsolete.³⁸ That only killed a few hundred people. They, with the improvement of the control of weaponry, they won't even have to *fly* over Nagasaki. They can do it at a distance and destroy more human lives. This is possible, they say, but just as an [mic noise, unintelligible] I think the best interpreter—and Dr. King was a Pacifist as well, and he's a man that I knew and enjoyed—that his attitude was universal, and that attitude carried a lot of people, Gandhi and others. Gandhi had inspired him to believe that life is universal. There's one earth, which has been put into divisions by human beings, but we all are in this earth together and as such, we have the idea that we must live together. So that's part of the inspiration that's carried this old man.

Leah Cohen: Ending on a good note for the time being, I thank you sincerely for the interview on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, and I will mail you a challenge coin as a token of our appreciation, and I will speak to Zenobia to arrange a follow-up interview.

Timuel Black: Thank you, I hope part of whatever you want to use of this conversation can be usable. Zenobia is right here now, and you can call up whenever you get ready, but she will know my availability and we'll work out a time, if you think it's worthwhile.

³⁸ Enrico Fermi and his colleagues at the University of Chicago designed the first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction, which was a key step in the Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb used in World War II..

Leah Cohen: Yes, I think it's absolutely worthwhile. And I really thank you.