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This is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Tilda Finzi Cohen, conducted by Gail Schwartz on April 14, 1998 in Bethesda, Maryland. This is tape number 1, side A. What is your full name?

Tilda Finzi Cohen.

And is that the name you were born with?

Well, no. The name I was born with was Mazel Tov Finzi.

How is it that you were given that name.

It was my grandmother's name who died many, many years before, which my father was only 11 years old. So he wanted to name his daughter after his deceased mother.

And when you were a small child you were called that?

No, I was never called that at home. I was always called Tilda, but I was always called Tilda at home. The only place I was called Mazel Tov was when I went to first grade, because that was on my birth certificate. So that was my legal name in Yugoslavia, was Mazel Tov, and that was a burden.

Where were you born and when were you born?

I was born in Split, in what was then Yugoslavia, July 11th, 1933.

Let's talk a little bit about the background of your family. Where did your parents come from? What were their names?

OK. My mother's name was Hannah Montilio, and she was born in Sarajevo. And my father's name was Maurice. So he went later on by the name of Mauricio Finzi. And he was also born in Sarajevo, but he moved to the island of Vis when he was extremely young, and then moved to Split. So basically, he had left Sarajevo at a very young age, maybe the age of five or six, and moved to the Dalmatian Coast, first in the island of Vis and then moved to Split.

How far back can you trace your generations, and where were they living?

I really can't. I don't know much about that. I think my parents' parents were from Sarajevo, and they lived there. One of my grandfathers, Montilio, was from Travnik, which is still near in Bosnia. But basically, that's all I know, not beyond that. Just my parents' parents I knew of.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

No, I am an only child.

What kind of work did your father do?

My father owned a dry goods store in Split.

Now, Split is a city on the Adriatic Coast?

It is. It's in Dalmatia. It's on the Adriatic. And it was a very pretty, little city. The sea was beautiful. Swimming was wonderful. It was a very small Jewish community, I think about 100 families, if I'm not mistaken.

But a very active Jewish community. It had a club. It had a very nice, little old synagogue. We also took our chickens to be killed there on Shabbat. Friday night, not on Shabbat, and before the holidays. We did not have kosher food.

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So I remember vividly going down. I was the maid, with the live chickens, taking the live chickens and having them killed for Friday. Actually for Saturday, I think. Friday night we didn't have meat. And then before the holidays, taking the chicken. We never had meat, beef, or something. It's interesting, small.

How religious was your family?

My father was very active. He went to Friday night services most of the time. I don't think he went to Saturday morning services. He had a dry goods store, so it had to be open. But very observant in the sense of very serious. We observed the holidays very, very much.

Kosher, it was a kind of hit and miss. I mean, kosher meat, kosher chicken, because there was no kosher butcher. Observant in the sense of observing all the holidays. And my father was very knowledgeable. He could always conduct services any place, conducted them for years, even in New York. He was president of the Yugoslav Jews of the United States and conducted their services.

What street did you live on? Do you remember your address in Split?

[NON-ENGLISH]

Number 11.

All right, now what kind of neighborhood was it? Was it a mixed neighborhood, mixed Jews and non-Jews?

Basically, there was no Jewish neighborhood by the time I was born, by the time my parents came to Split. It was basically we lived in a building. It was six. On each floor there were two apartments, large.

And there were three floors. And there were no other Jews live in the building, but there were some Jews living in the next building. And there were some Jews living a block down, and across the street there were a couple.

So it was a very-- I think it was probably what was-- would've been considered a middle to up-- middle class-- definitely, middle class neighborhood. Was a lot of non Jews. Jews were maybe in each building-- not in each building, maybe every other third building there was a family.

Did you have an extended family of other relatives?

In Split, I had a step-grandmother and an aunt, which was-- if my father were alive, he would be very upset because I would say his half sister because to him it was his sister. And her name was Tilda. He was-- she was named after the deceased mother. This was a long story. But anyway-- and an uncle, my father's brother. So they all came to my mother's house for Shabbat dinner and for the holidays.

Did you have cousins, also?

I had cousins in Sarajevo and in Zagreb and in Belgrade. I did not-- before the war, I did not have cousins in Split. My mother's brothers lived in Zagreb, some in Zagreb, some in Sarajevo. So there was-- I had cousins but not in Split at the time when the war started. Later on, they had escaped to Split.

What language did you speak at home? At home, I spoke mostly Serbo-Croatian, and my parents spoke Ladino-- where we-- it's called Ladino here. I don't know what I call it Spanish at home for me not to understand, of course. Picked it up so I could know all the secrets of the family. So I-- both languages were spoken at home. But I spoke only Serbo-Croatian.

So your family is part of Sephardic Jewry.

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Yes. I'm a Sephardic Jew. My mother and father was Sephardic.

Did you have any favorite holidays?

Favorite holidays? It's interesting where now it's Pesach, so it's interesting. I don't know that-- my favorite holiday was probably what we called [NON-ENGLISH]. I don't even know what it is. When you get all the dried fruit, then you walk around with the little-- you put the dried fruit in a paper bag and you put a flag and you walk around the whole synagogue and all this.

Simchat Torah?

There was this Sim-- it's interesting. It must be Simchat Torah. Do we dry fruit for Simchat Torah?

Children walk around with flags.

I know that. I know, but it was more-- it was like a fall holiday with all the-- that's right. Now, that you-- I have not connected that. But we always had like a feast of dried fruits and nuts, and we each got our bag. And it was like a party, big party at the synagogue.

Let's talk a little bit more about the Jewish community. What was the name of the synagogue?

I don't remem-- I don't know that it had a particular name, at least I don't remember it. There was a one and only synagogue. It was in a very kind of-- you couldn't even notice it was a synagogue from the outside. It went through a very narrow entrance among stores.

But you would then walk up some steps, and then there was a synagogue, a very lovely synagogue. Actually, was women sat upstairs. Men sat downstairs.

It was a lovely little synagogue with a-- also, garden I talked to you about, this [NON-ENGLISH] where you-- we used to have. And what's-- had its own garden like for [INAUDIBLE]. They used to have soccer there, too. But it was nothing-- I mean, from the outside you could not see that it was-- it was just like a little opening and you walked in and it was a long, narrow street and then there were some steps.

Do you think that was because of protection not to show the public that this was a synagogue?

I would don't-- I wasn't-- I get not the impression I had at the time. So it could have been. But I don't-- almost everything was in the old town. Everything was-- there were-- streets were extremely narrow.

And so everything was like-- unless there was a store. But of course, churches had big open area. So maybe you're right. In my own child's mind, I'd never conceived it-- never perceived it that way, [INAUDIBLE].

Did you have a non-Jewish friends? We're talking about as a small child.

Yes, I did have non-Jewish friends. Most of the young people that lived in the building. As I said, everybody was non-Jewish.

I had one Jewish friend, though, and was a boy. And then I had mostly non-Jewish friends that I played with.

What was the name of your non-Jewish-- your Jewish friend?

Maritza was a little girl that lived in the building and she was my-- we talking now before the war. We're not-- we talking before 1941. Because after 1941, things changed.

Did you-- yeah. We're talking before the war. Did you-- and again, you were very, very young. Did you have any

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special hobbies or enjoyable things you liked to do as a small child?

Do I have any special hobbies? I'm trying to-- yes. When I went to Sarajevo, they used to take me to the amusement park with all the-- please help me.

The rides.

The rides, yes. And that's what I remember. And my greatest hobby was the beach. I was-- I'm still a good swimmer, I think. And I learned to swim before I-- definitely before I learned to read. So going to the beach and swimming was one of my-- and jumping into, and diving was one of my biggest hobbies.

How would you describe your parents and their relationship to you when you were still young? Were they very protective of you?

They were very-- I would say very protective. And I was being an only child. Very much involved what I ate and what I didn't. And-- I'm sorry-- they were very caring. My father was-- my parents were both very nice people, but my father was extremely close to me from the time I was born.

Were there any favorite songs that your parents used to sing to you when you were a child that you can remember?

Yes. I remember song. I can't-- I don't have a good voice. My-- both parents both had very nice voices. But it's still the same songs that I sing to my grandchildren. Not the adult, not the-- but now we have a young one, very young grandchild, a nine-month-old. And he loves that.

Can you sing a line or two?

[NON-ENGLISH SINGING]

Can you translate that?

A little bird came, flew-- flew-- flew to us. And in her beak is carrying a letter. And the letter there-- he's brought a letter. And in the letter regards from the mother-- from my mother.

That's lovely. That's lovely. All right. Now, you were born in 1933. So when did you start going to school?

I started going to school when I was-- that's a good question. 1943, I think.

Not before you were 10 years old?

No. 1940. OK. 1940, I was seven. You didn't start going to school before seven. I started some nursery school, like the German nursery school, or something like that that was run by-- but public school I started in 1940.

What is your first memory?

It's interesting. I don't know if it's because I remember pictures of me at the beach surrounded by-- or it was always the first-- one of the first memories, because I spend an awful lot of time at the beach. I still love the ocean. I think it was at the beach, probably, I think, just with my family.

And also where the-- we used to have lunch. We used-- because maybe I adored it so much because it would be used to have one of these little [? cabana ?], a little-- just there-- it was just at the beach. Many people next door to each other where we change. And we were not comfortable.

The maids were-- we never had a car. We never had a refrigerator. We had help because it was not available at that time. We had help, so we went to the beach.

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My mother and I and my dad used to meet us in this little shack. But everybody had the-- and the maid used to bring lunch. We used to swim and then have lunch at the beach and stay for an hour or two, and then go home.

How close was your house to the water? Did you live in the old Roman section of the city?

No, no. We lived in the newer section of the city. And it was probably about 10 minutes walk from the beach at the most.

How politically oriented was your father before the war-- before the war?

Before the war, my father was very political oriented. As a matter of fact, I think he was in jail as a communist when he was 18 years old-- 17, 18. He was very active.

This was before-- of course, before I was born-- before-- I was born when he was 30. But he was in prison because of having been somehow active in the Communist Party.

Was he very Zionistic?

Extremely Zionistic. He was-- he went to the-- actually, later on, he went to the Congress in Vienna. And he was always very pro-Israel and he was very-- yeah, extremely. Go ahead.

Did he talk to you about this when you were very young?

About the Communist Party, no. But the Zionism and Israel and all that, yes, very much. I think that's why we ended up in the United States.

My father was worried that if we stayed in Israel-- in Italy that I possibly could marry somebody not Jewish. That was a big worry. And Israel was out because family was in Israel who had a very hard life. So they discouraged us from going there.

Do you-- now, Hitler came into power in 1933. Do you recall-- you were only six years old when Poland was invaded, and even younger with Austria and Czechoslovakia. Do you have any recollections of hearing of a man named Hitler or anything?

I don't have any recollection of anything like that, really.

I mean, granted, you were a young child.

Yeah.

So it's understandable.

I do not have any recollection of that. I-- my first recollection of Germans and Nazis and stuff was in nineteen-- beginning of 1941. I don't even remember when Yugoslavia entered the war against Germany. I believe it was in 1941.

And that's when my father went into the army. He was called into the army.

This is March 25, 1941.

I guess. So I'm just putting things in place that-- and my father was called into the army and left home, and was gone for about a month in the army. And then Yugoslavia basically got capitulated, and my father was able to get back. But before he got back-- I remember this vividly-- this is-- if you think of memories that remember.

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My mother and I in the afternoon went to some friends who, as I told you, Jews lived all over. So the Jewish family lived the other side. Not the other side of town but maybe two or three miles away.

And we walked. No public transportation was there, but we walked there and had dinner there, because there was a close friend. And then we started walking back home. And the children-- and the children-- what that word-- and as we were walking back, the whole city was full of Germans in trucks, in big-- not motorcycle-- motorcycles? Uh-huh. I mean, entering the city en masse.

And my mother said, oh, my-- she was already-- she knew. She said, oh, my God. Oh, I hope we make it home. I hope we make it home.

Of course, they didn't know we were Jewish. There was nothing to indicate. We were just walking the streets. But was also uncomfortable. She knew what was coming. She knew.

And that was my first realization that this was bad, because the fear in her. And my father, of course, had not come home yet. We didn't know where he was.

But the Germans only went through the city, and they went through during the night. And then in the morning, there were no Germans there anymore. Used it as a passage.

Let's back up a little bit. Before that-- before that happened, you had started school already.

I started first grade. In September, probably, of 1940.

Yeah. Did you experience any anti-Jewish feelings? Did the other children know you were Jewish? Did any of the teachers express anything?

They all knew that I was Jewish.

How did they know that?

It was obvious, and I don't know why. I think that it was known we celebrated different holidays. We didn't celebrate Christmas. We didn't-- but it was never considered anything.

Like this Maritza that I told you lived under us-- actually, they were-- they lived in the basement, and they were kind of taking care of the building. And they were very, very helpful. They actually got our winter coat and hid them. And I think we got them from them afterwards.

So I don't think they were hiding partisans in there. So it was not a matter-- they were always very open. So I-- from this particular, I think there were comments.

I remember I had heard that a doctor had said some-- something about Jews, a negative comment. And when my mother said he's the best doctor in town and I had to have surgery on my tonsils, I said, I'm not going to him. So I was a very-- I said, I'll take a second rate doctor, but not going to him.

He made a negative comment. He treated some immigrants-- [NON-ENGLISH] we used to call them-- from other cities badly. He--

When are we talking about now?

Well, we talking during the occupation, the Italian occupation, forgive me. OK.

And when you were at school, again, before the Germans came in, did the teachers treat you equally?

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I had a-- I did not-- do not remember being treated badly. I really do not.

Up to the time that the Germans came in, had you heard of a man called Hitler?

And I was seven but it was-- I was seven. I don't remember. I be honest, I don't remember hearing about Hitler.

Now, when your father was first called up, what did he say to you when he had to leave? Do you remember that it's a painful leaving time?

Not really. I know he had to go, and I don't even remember a big goodbye or anything. It's interesting. But I remember when he came back.

My mother was just so thrilled because she didn't know was he taken prisoner. Because some people were taken prisoner-- prisoner or worse by-- the war by the Germans. I don't really remember.

But I remember him-- he's coming back. This was a major thing. Was about a week or two after the-- that those Germans walking through the city. So that I remember very joyful time that he was alive and with us again.

Was he able to keep his business?

No. As soon as the Italians came, he had to give up the business. That was it. You couldn't own businesses. Children could not go to school. It was just a different world.

Now, the Italians occupied Split on April 6, 1941.

Is that what it is? I don't remember the date. I'm sorry.

So the Germans had marched in March through--

Marched through, only march through. And had I not been out that night, I might have and might not have been aware of that.

Was that a frightening sight for you to see as a child?

It was a very frightening sight, not as a Jew maybe, but just as a-- there's masses of soldiers in this big camioni-- what is the-- trucks, the military trucks. And all in this-- well, they were-- just was big helmets. It was just the frightening at night and walking.

It was just-- we were not walking very far, but it was just-- it was-- plus, we were not used to these major trucks. There was no traffic. I didn't know anybody who owned a car.

Did your mother explain to you what this meant?

I don't think she really explained anything and we're walking. She just wanted to get home. Just stay close to me. Let's walk to the side. Don't look up to much, just walk home. Let's get home.

And would you describe yourself as being very obedient and doing what your parents said?

That was part of a child of that era. Plus, it was a part of the child of the-- you already knew. You knew by the fear maybe in your parent's voice that you better do.

It wasn't something that-- there was no room for rebellion. Not because they didn't allow you to rebel, but because there was just-- the fear was implicit in their voice, I think. That's what I perceive of it.

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Now, did you go to school right after that? The Italians came in about two weeks later.

The Italians came about two weeks later. They opened the schools with Italian teachers. Now, we were annexed to Italy.

Now, the Serbo-Croatian language did not exist anymore in the schools. Classes were in Italian. Everything was Italian.

Up to that point, did you just know the one language or did you know other languages?

I knew the Ladino, the Spanish. I was familiar with that. I had not known Italian. My father spoke it. Because he did business-- we went to-- I don't know, but he spoke Italian always. In Split, many people spoke Italian, the older generation. I did not.

And it arrived [INAUDIBLE]. There were Italian teacher, the administration is Italian, everything is Italian in the school. And I did go to school.

Was this the same school?

Same school, same classroom, different teacher and different language.

Was this frightening to you, upsetting or challenging?

I think was more challenging than upsetting. And I had an advantage. I spoke Ladino. I spoke Spanish.

Most of the people were real Croatians, who-- of the city. I was the only Jewish child in the class. And I was the only one that spoke Ladino, which made Italian very understandable.

You were almost eight years old, a few months before your eighth--

I was almost eight, yeah, almost eight years old. And by this time, I could communicate with the teacher. I understood everything. I don't know how. I still don't know how.

And I was the one that was-- I think she spoke Serbo-Croatian, but she was not allowed to.

Now, how normal was your life right after this?

It was fairly normal. The only abnormal thing was that all the people from Sarajevo, from Belgrade, and from Zagreb, started coming in droves with false papers. By that, I mean, my father's brother-- two brothers, my mother's sisters, my mother's brothers. So our home became from having these three people and the maid living in there. We had to get rid of the maid because they were not allowed to have a maid [INAUDIBLE]. And--

What other restrictions? You said your father lost his business.

Lost his business.

You were not allowed to have a maid.

Not allowed to have a maid. Not allowed, but-- well, this took place within six months or a year. Not allowed to go to school.

I'm not allowed to congregate any place basic like. I don't know what else, really.

OK. Well, let's go through this gradually. So these relatives started coming. What did that mean to you as a child? Did you understand why they were coming?

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Yeah. Immediately, I knew they were escaping the Germans people. By that time, I think my young cousin, the one that was taken to Jasenovac, they knew that he had been killed. He was-- somehow they just shot him there. They didn't send him. And his family came-- his mother, his father, and his sister.

Did your parents tell you that that happened?

I think I sensed it. I knew it. It was just-- the mother was crying. It was just-- I don't think secrets were-- there were no secrets. And there were secrets-- this was said in Ladino and my parents didn't know that I spoke it. So I was aware of everything.

I was aware when my mother used to collect clothes for the partisans. I was-- it's interesting how much you knew without knowing, without being told.

Do you remember being very frightened in this beginning time?

No, I don't remember being frightened. I really don't.

Would you ask your parents questions-- as I said, you're almost eight years old-- why the change, why you had to have Italian teachers?

It was almost-- and it's interesting. I never ask those questions. It's almost like I understood without being told.

The city was occupied Ital-- by the Italian. The fascists were there. Everything legal was in Italian, even the signs as I showed you in this book were in Italian.

So the city was just under a different role. So this was it. And learn Italian, and that was it.

And now as you said gradually changes were made. And how did that affect you as a child?

The big change that affected me mostly was-- and I don't recall when it happened. The only thing I remember is that I wore a fur coat, a white fur coat when it happened, that I was thrown out of school. So I don't think was in April or-- they came, you said, in April?

So I must've finished that school year and did fine, did very well. And the teacher loved me and-- because I spoke the lingo, the language. And then school started again.

Maybe it was second grade. And I was-- then your mood was the same class and I had, I think, the same teacher that I had started with. You stayed with the same teacher for years then, for four years.

And it was very cold, started getting cold. And I was in school one day, the teacher said to me-- I realized something was going on. I was not told what was going-- they were-- the whole family was sitting and having coffee late. There was nothing to do.

I went to school, came home for lunch, and went back. And there was some kind of strange feeling in the house. And I don't know what it was. I didn't know what it was.

But I went to school. And I have the feeling that was in the afternoon session. They had two sessions-- morning and afternoon. We didn't go.

And they call-- the teacher said to me, would you please go and get your father? I said, I didn't do anything wrong. And she says, oh, no, you didn't, absolutely not. She says, but I just need to talk to him. Would you go get him?

And when I got home, father was not the least bit surprised. He says, why don't you stay home. Don't go back. I insisted-- insisted that I wanted to go back. And I went back with him.

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And of course, my father spoke Italian. And she told him-- that's what he said, how sorry she was that she had to do this. Because I was the only one that understood her after I spoke Ladino, so I had picked up Italian. And I already had made such progress in Italian.

And so they won-- she-- he said, well, I know you can't keep her. You want me to take her home? And she said, let her finish the day. And she says, she'll go home with the other. And then when she gets home, tell her.

And so I was not aware of anything. Went home and I was told you're not-- can't go back to school. That was it.

Did they give you a reason why you couldn't go back?

Oh, none of the Jewish kids could go. They did give me the reason. None of the Jewish children could go.

And at eight years old, school is normality. So what did that mean to you?

It is normality. And I was always a very good student. It was very meaningful for me. I was-- there-- I've always been-- I always was a good student, Italy and States. I mean, I was always good student. And it was very hard.

But immediately, my father said, don't worry, we'll form a school. There'll be a school. Your Uncle Solomon will teach it. And this is the engineer [INAUDIBLE].

We'll get teachers. We'll do it near the synagogue. We'll get a room. We'll do it in different people's houses. Don't worry. There'll be a school.

That's what was happening in my house when I was leaving for school in the afternoon. That was happening. They already knew it was happening. So it was being organized. They already were planning for it.

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Tilda Finzi Cohen. This is tape number one, side B. And we're talking about the Fall of 1941. You had just been told by your teacher-- or by your father that you were not able to continue on to school. And you had mentioned something about a white-- little white fur coat. Can you say something more about that?

White little fur coat, which just, I guess, a coat that one of my uncles must have sent me for a gift. My mother had quite a few brothers that were not married and I was spoiled by them. So the little fur coat they sent, I think, before the end-- before the beginning of the war, or just maybe 1940 or something.

This little fur white coat that looked like a-- like spun candy or something. But it was very cold. The-- Split didn't have a lot of snow, but it was a very cold city because of the wind. The wind they called bura, which was a very strong wind that came from the sea and it kind of penetrating.

Of course, there was no transportation-- buses, but we didn't take this. So they sent me this little fur coat. And that was my coat, was very-- and as a matter of fact, a few weeks after I was thrown out of school, the organization of the school took-- to organize the Jewish school took a field-- probably a month or six weeks.

But after a few weeks, my non-Jewish little schoolmates who I still saw in the neighborhood started saying, why didn't you come back to school like-- I said, I can't. Well, why don't you come? They won't allow me to come back to school. I'm Jewish. I can't come.

And I still played with them in the neighborhood, in the garden-- in the back of the house, which was a garden type of thing. So what they ask the teacher, why can't Tilda come back to school? She didn't want to explain. She says, she didn't come back.

Can she come back? Can we tell her to come back? They said, of course. And they kept telling me the teacher said you

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could come back.

I told that to my father. And my father say, honey, that is not true. It is not true. [INAUDIBLE] only like an eight-year-old only spoiled, only child, a little spoiled. I threw an absolute fit.

And I said I was going. Then my father said, no, honey. Finally, he said, OK, I'll take you, which was-- many people blame him for it. Who I-- to whom I have told this story.

He took me and went with me. I think it was in the afternoon. Somehow, there were two sessions. School started from [INAUDIBLE] early afternoon. And they were outside at some kind of an assembly.

And my father went to talk to the teacher. And I came with my book-- book bag and everything. And she says, no, I made a mistake. I shouldn't have told the children to tell her she could come back. I just found it easier, or something to that effect.

She was very apologetic and apologized. And I was standing in the background because my father was talking, and I remember she shook her head. That's all I remember. And went back home.

I think I cried. I'm sure I cried-- I remember something. And it's kind of sad. I was a very strong-willed child, and my father and mother didn't know how to deal with this. That rejection was worst, I think.

But I guess we all could have done things better. But we do the best we can. Within a few weeks, the Jewish school started. And it was fun.

Number one, there were older boys. I was eight or something. There were two or three grades thrown together and a big table, almost like this one, and just above someplace, above some store.

And there were-- they used to call it-- used to be a storage space and maga-- but they cleaned it up, put a bathroom in there, put some lights, and it was OK. It was this whole group of Jewish children that were in different classes, in different-- boys and girls were for the first time together, because I was in an all girls school. I mean, schools were all girls or all boys.

So here we were thrown together. And there were no back-- school-- in schools, you have what, where you sit?

Desks.

Desks. OK. Bunk here, I was thinking. OK. You have desks. We were not sitting at the desks. We were sitting in a very large table, very large, very long and narrow table on both sides. One grade was one side, and one grade and the other. We learned still. We still learned.

And we had very good teachers, because these were the people that had lost their jobs teaching, the Jewish teachers that had lost their job. So we had professors teaching. By professors, I meant people that taught in high school, people that taught-- had taught at the University that had escaped. So the teachers were marvelous, very, very good teacher.

And we-- I went there for two years. And at the end of each year, school year, we gave exams to the-- in Italian. Now, we are being taught in Italian, you must [INAUDIBLE], because we were given exams in Italian. And we were actually giving-- being promoted and given exams, and given grades by the Italian government. He ever wanted--

The government recognized this school.

It was recognized in some respect-- we couldn't-- but they did-- and if you ever want to read a book about this, read the book The Garden of the Finzi-Continis written in Italian, but of course, in English. This book speaks of the same thing. Actually, speaks of the way the Italians treated the Jews.

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So we went to the end of the school year and gave exams. And of course, because many of us were Sephardic and spoke Ladino, we were-- we did wonderfully in Italian, and we picked it up immediately. There were people like my uncle who taught, but he had studied at the University of Milan.

And his name?

My-- Solomon Finzi. And he was an engineer, PhD engineer, who had studied in Milan and came back to Yugoslavia to practice. And he was an engineer in Belgrade, but he was-- he had escaped to Split from Belgrade and he couldn't work. So he taught because his Italian was perfect. He had studied in university there for five years. And I think-- I thought it was perfect. I don't know.

How many students were at the school in the beginning?

Well, the two grades. We met in different places, in different houses. I had this-- I was in second or third grade, or third and fourth grade, something. And then basically, we had elementary school for four years, then middle school, then high school. So basically, these three groups met in different places.

So there were no Jewish children who could go to the regular school all the way through high school.

No, no. No, absolutely not. So they-- some met in my uncle's apartment. They had escaped so they had empty rooms in the apartment. So they form classrooms.

And in different people's houses, there were classrooms. But they did you have to have the permission of the Italian authorities to do that.

When you were out in the street and you saw Italian military people, what was that sight for you as a child? Was it frightening?

It wasn't really frightening. It wasn't frightening if they were not wearing black shirts. If they were wearing-- if they were a fascist, it was frightening. If they're not, they were just soldiers. It was not frightening.

As a matter of fact, we had what they called coprifuoco, which is-- well, you cannot go out at night. What is it?

Curfew.

Curfew. Forgive me. Speaking of this, the English is escaping me. Normally, doesn't. I speak English, I think, quite well. But it's funny, words-- so we had a curfew. And my mother got very ill.

We didn't have telephones. She was having a gallbladder attack. And below us an Italian officer had rented a room from a family, a non-Jewish family, because he was in the military. And he had rented a room with a balcony.

And he was on the balcony smoking a cigarette and was about 1:00 in the morning. And my father could not go out to get a doctor at that time, and didn't because he would be shot on sight. Not because he is Jewish, because just because there was a curfew. So he, of course, spoke Italian.

So from the upper floor, he addressed this gentleman. And he said, would you excuse me, please, but I need a doctor. My wife is very ill. And how could-- I know-- could you go to the police station just a block down and ask them to call a doctor or something?

And he said, but I am a physician and I'll be right up. Course, there was a mezuzah though, he knew we were Jewish. But he was very lonely. Nobody spoke Italian to him.

And he came and took care of my mother. And from then on, used to come up to visit and how my mother was and how my mother wasn't. But it was very dangerous because then you could-- the Yugoslavian people who were pro

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communist and pro partisan, you didn't want the association to be made.

So it was a very-- but he was a wonderful gentleman who took care, gave her medicine, and actually-- so basically, I was not fearful then. And sometimes when I went to the beach-- the beach-- there was one beach that was rough beach where you didn't-- wasn't a fancy beach where we could go, as well. I still went swimming.

We're talking about 9-year-olds who went swimming to the beach alone, met friends. I used to walk through a bridge, and the Germans-- German-- Italian soldier were standing guard. Not a black shirt now.

And he would stop me and he wanted to speak Italian. He would address me in Italian. By that time, I spoke Italian. I don't know how, but I'd been going to school.

And he would show me pictures of his family and his daughter. And it was like we had made friends, this-- somebody on guard over bridge. So, no, I was not-- I was never fearful of the Italians. Some fascist, black shirt, I was a little fearful.

What did that mean to you?

It meant-- well, it actually meant a lot because the fascist is the ones that initially had beaten the Jews coming out of synagogue on a Friday night, and took all the sacred books and burned them on the Piazza. And basically, this is what it meant. You had to-- and beaten the older men that had been [INAUDIBLE].

My father stopped going to synagogue. He was-- but the older men continued going. And they would be-- as they were coming out, they were beating them. It was this--

Is this the beating of June 1942?

Probably. It was in the summer or [INAUDIBLE]. OK. It was-- and we were sitting and all at once, we started seeing the chairs of the synagogue being transported out on trucks. By that, I mean, seeing them on trucks and my father recognized it. He was from-- so we knew something had happened.

And they burned all the sacred books. And here, I happen to have a picture where there was such a black mark on the Piazza. And Jews never walk through here-- never, never walked. But they would walk around after that. Never on that again.

Yeah, that was it. That was in the summer. I remember being hot-- warm. And some of the orthodox older men, and they all got beaten very badly. And then everything from the synagogue was burned that was-- the sacred books were burned. But some of the furniture. I remember chairs being seen.

You are nine years old. What does that do to a nine-year-old to hear about that, see that?

Well, the fear of the fascist, because the fascist, we always distinguished between the Italian and the fascist. There was always a distinction in our minds. The fascists were the ones that beat the Jews, imprison them, came to pick up my uncle who lived with us, and took him to prison for no reason. This was normal.

Actually, was a badge of honor-- does that make sense-- to be in prison. What does it feel like to have an uncle in prison? My father, my mother were afraid to bring him food.

So who got chosen to go to the prison and bring food? It was safest to send a nine-year-old to go to the jail. You see, the jail-- the people in jail did not get food there. The families used to have to bring food.

So who got chosen? The little girl was safe to send to the jail to bring food to my uncle. And I still spoke Italian so I spoke to them Italian and they would open actually where they were. And I could see him through the window. And I would wave to him. They would have never done that for an adult.

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This is the uncle that was teaching Solomon?

No, that was my uncle Chaim [PERSONAL NAME] who died during the war. He died with the partisans. He then got out of jail, went in the mountains with us, and died fighting with the partisans.

What was the name of the physician that helped your mother [INAUDIBLE]?

I'm sorry, I don't remember. Don't know.

And were-- did your parents let you go out on the street alone during the day?

I always went out. I-- from what I remember. First, I went with the maid every place, and then I went every place alone.

Even after the Italian occupation.

Yeah. There was no-- they would never hurt a child. You don't understand. We're not talking about-- even the Jewish child, they would never hurt a child. That's not part of the Italian mentality. They were always very kind to children. Strange.

So you-- tell me a little bit more about the trip to the prison bringing your uncle food.

It was nothing. It's just whatever time--

You did it more than once.

Daily basis, once a day, midday. It used to be this little holders that had little pots, one on top of another and the holder. And I would take the holder with the food, and I would come-- of course, I spoke Italian.

This was a tremendous advan-- you can't-- and I would arrive there. And they would say hello to-- the prison guards say hello to me. And they would yell sometimes.

Sometimes I would just give them the thing. And I would, I think, wait for the-- so he could bring me back the pots, or I would pick them up the next day. I don't-- that part I don't remember.

But then he says, do you want to see him? He says, I'll call him to the window. It was an inside courtyard-- an inside courtyard. So they will open this door and then we yell for him to come at the window of the cells so he could see me. I would wave.

So basically, I had made friends with the jailers. And I came everyday and brought him food, because my father and mother were afraid to go. It was-- they knew that nobody would hurt-- it was a-- it's strange that it was a safe place for a child in that time-- at that time.

You had said that other relatives had been coming to Split. Were any of them living with you?

The house was full of people. Yes, they lived there. Some of them rented private rooms in the building-- in the building. People that were willing to make some extra money.

But I think every room in our house, which was a three, four, five room house. But every room was taken.

You're talking about an apartment.

It's an apartment, yeah, forgive me. Every room was taken up with people. And five people, four people in a room.

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So you had to share your room.

Oh, we have to share everything. Share the food, share the house.

Did you like that or did you resent it?

I don't think I resented it. I was an only child and loved this houseful of people. Didn't mind it, no. I don't remember minding it.

I remember being a lot of work for my mother. But the women helped and they all did the cooking.

Was there enough food?

Food? There was bread and there was some food. There were vegetables. Meat was probably scarce. There was probably fish.

We didn't have butter, and I adored butter, and still do. And there was kind of a-- I don't remember being hungry, but I'm sure my father was. Because he always-- if there was something that I liked, or something, he always gave it to me.

So I think he lost weight-- excuse me-- but I don't remember being hungry at all. Being hungry for things, like butter, or something like that. But don't remember being hungry.

Were you aware, or did-- or did you know, or did your parents talk about what was happening in the rest of your-- in '41, '42?

It was a great deal. They liberated the city. They took-- Germans were going, and it was-- the Germans were advancing. The fear was great. Already, I was aware that the fear was great.

The Germans are advancing in this front. The fronts, on the Russian front, this front, and the big talk at that point was the Americans and the British were already in Sicily. They were already in southern Italy.

They are in southern Italy. They going to cross the Adriatic, and we are going to be liberated. Not until-- it didn't happen.

But there was a great deal of hope that the Allies would come, because they were already set in Italy. It just takes a boat ride to invade. They didn't do it. They never did it, actually. Was not part of their plan.

So they were-- we were always talking at the Russian front and the African front, I mean, these things were part of the everyday conversation. Everybody was listening to some kind of secret radios, shortwave, I don't know what they had.

Were radios forbidden?

Oh, yeah, it was all very forbidden. And so there was our secrets, many secrets. And the secret was other secrets-- collecting clothes, collecting money for the partisans, [? Tito's ?] partisans, many of my-- my cousin, actually who died fighting was the parti-- another Tilda Finzi.

My uncle Beppo Finzi, Joseph Finzi's daughter, another Tilda Finzi. They all named their children after the dead mother, all the brothers, my father's brother. And she joined the Communist Party when she was about 15 or 16 doing-- it's the-- it wasn't the Communist Party. It was just the people that fought against the occupation.

And she, unfortunately, was one of-- threw some kind of petrol on one of the commanders of the city. She was an attractive young woman, and she walked by and threw petrol. Because it was an anti-fascist movement.

And immediately the next day, she didn't get caught. She was not caught, but she escaped and went to the part-- went to

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the mountains and was in the partisans. She was the only daughter of my uncle, Beppo Finzi. And she died fighting with the partisans.

Now, what was your father doing once he helped to start this school? Was he involved in resistance?

In the what?

Was he involved with school? Was he involved with resistance? What was he doing?

I think because of him-- his being known to have been Communist in his very youth, he was 18. He was coping-- keeping a very low profile, maybe collecting-- food collecting. But he was keeping an extremely low profile.

As a matter of fact, they jailed my Uncle Beppo for telling him that he was a communist in 1918, 1919. He had not been. He knew that who they were looking for was my father.

And he says, no, I was here but he never mentioned. So my father was never-- my uncle-- but he was ill with something so he was put in the hospital. And he managed to survive. Unfortunately, started and she died fighting with the partisans.

And so your father, you said, kept a low profile. What did he do to pass the time of day?

What he passed the time of day, I guess, went from store visited his-- he had many non-Jewish friends who owned stores, went to theirs. A very interesting story, though, which I don't know. He was very well thought of.

So there was an Italian family that lived in Split who had a store. And my father also used to kind of sell retail and sell-- how do you say--

Wholesale?

--wholesale. Forgot those words already. And there was a Jewish-- an Italian man, non-Jewish, who had a store-- lingerie. And was interesting because he went to Italy on a buying trip with his wife, this man. And had teenage-- 20-year-old children or something in the late teens, early 20s.

And the boat was torpedoed and both of them died. So came the fascist-- Italian fascist came to help them sell the store. The children had to sell out the store, liquidate the store.

So they said, do you know anybody who your father respected who could do this for you? He says, sure, I do, Mr. Finzi [INAUDIBLE]. But he said, he's Jewish. But that's the only man in this city that my father would trust with something like this.

So my father after having given up his business, had to go and liquidate this store for the fascist, because these young children wanted my father. So it was an interest-- it's kind of an interesting situation. But that's-- so he-- I remember him working for them for almost six months liquidating this store that he used to sell merchandise to.

Did your parents talk about to you what was happening on the other parts of the continent, like what was happening in Poland, or did they know?

I don't think they really knew. They knew by the time there were concentration camps. They never mentioned that they-- I don't think they-- as I said, they spoke in Ladino many of these things.

And I would hear about it. I knew a lot, but not by virtue-- also, you didn't tell your children in case they start questioning the children. You did not want them to know what the families see-- the family thing.

When you were-- and you were continuing to go to school during this time. What school-- what did you talk about with

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your friends in your free time? Did you talk about--

Normal things that kids talked about. Who liked whom, was he cute, was he not? Did he pass you a note? I [? assure you ?] we didn't talk about serious things at all. Plus, the teachers were not allowed.

See, they-- you were-- you can compromise yourself if you tell the children anything, if they-- so you basically-- but we were devilish. We were-- I remember I was the devil. I always remember this because from one teacher to the next, like we had a Hebrew teacher that came who was the rabbi.

Well, I said, you know what? Let's turn the lights off so he'll let us go home. He says, well, we can't turn-- I said, well, let's get this-- he was-- he was late. So we put a chair on top of the table and we climbed on top and unscrewed all the bulbs. And when he walked in, there was no light. So he sent us home.

So we had fun. Don't-- we had-- it wasn't one of these oppressive type of thing, no. It was-- and the rabbi came to give us our Hebrew lesson after the regular teacher left. You see, they left us alone also. It was-- it's a different-- and we unscrewed all the bulbs.

And did your family feel free to celebrate Jewish holidays during this time?

At home, yes, I think we did. I think we did celebrate the Jewish holidays. Not I think, I know. The cooking-- might have been very little food, but we did celebrate. We did say all the prayers, yeah.

But did not go to the synagogue? You said it had--

There was no synagogue.

What street was the synagogue located on?

On the same street as this bookstore, and I don't remember, sorry.

So events went on without anything too frightening until when?

Nothing particular. People were taken to prison. They were beaten in prison. But if it didn't affect you personally, you kind of left-- well, there were events that took place.

There was a lot of resistance movement within the city. So we had major curfews that started at 5:00 and all of this, the feeling. But as far as Jewishness, was not really-- the fear was there.

You could, I think par-- you could feel the fear of the parents what was going to be. Somehow we all, I think I-- what was going to be, especially around September when the Italians first Tito-- first Mussolini was taken out of power. He lost it. Then Italy capitulated.

And now we're talking about September '43.

Yes.

Because up to September '43--

'43-- except for all these things we couldn't go here. We couldn't go there. We couldn't--

Did you have any identifying papers or anything to show that you were Jewish?

By the way, this is something every Italian, every Yugoslavian had to have identity paper. And of course, any papers that we carried was marked as Jews. This was definitely. We did not wear any badges or anything of that sort, do I need

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the-- [NON-ENGLISH], no, we did not.

Did you yourself have your own set of papers?

I think I was probably on my parents. I did not carry them. I don't remember carrying papers, no.

And you said you did go out on the streets by yourself.

Yes, I went out on the streets by myself. Went to school by myself, walked back. This is my city, my town. It was-- it was not a big-- but it was-- yeah, I felt quite independent.

And now it's September '43.

September '43, Italy capitulates. That means there's arms all over thrown on the streets. There-- the Italians are fleeing. They are going up to the mountains to join the partisans.

My father says, we have to leave. We have to leave. We know that southern Italy is occupied by the Italians. So he collects all the money he can, everything, and they tried to hire a boat to leave for southern Italy. It didn't work.

We pack. We go down to the pier. The boat never was allowed to leave. Somehow, there was something that happened. I don't know what. Nobody left.

Or maybe one boat left. We were not in that first boat. The second boat never took off-- never left.

What was your reaction when your parents said, that you're going to leave your town that you grew up in?

Well, they were talking the Germans are coming. And so the Germans are coming, so it's bad. We had to leave. I mean, I knew from being thrown out from school, I knew what to-- it was just going to be much worst.

So you did not question your parents?

You didn't question. Question was not part of-- there was no time for questions. But also you knew it was pow-- I mean, you could feel it in the air that was major. We had to escape.

Some people cho-- and some people chose not to, interesting. They couldn't go. But I was a grown-- grown child. Somehow I was a child that was an independent child. And I could hear everything as if I knew we had to leave.

You are 10 years old. Did you feel much older than what we think of a typical ten--

Oh, yeah. I don't know what a 10-year-old is now. I was very, very, very adult 10-year-old, very adult 10-year-old. And then now--

Do you think that was because of what you were experiencing or your personality?

I don't know. It's hard to say. I think it's what we experienced. It was just the-- I don't think was my personality. It was just that I was thrown into a situation.

And then now-- it was admired. It was considered-- to be this way, it was considered something positive for the times. Because my Uncle Solomon Finzi, the engineer, he had a son that was a year or two younger than I.

And with him, they didn't-- the husband, my uncle, went into the partisan-- went to the partisans with us. He didn't. He stayed with his mother. His mother couldn't-- that he could handle being in the mountains.

And unfortunately, my cousin Sasha Finzi and his mother [PERSONAL NAME] that died in concentration camp. His

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father-- so I always felt like-- I felt guilty somewhat about that, because I always consider Sasha, oh, he's such a baby. His mother used to hold him by his hand.

And I was an independent kind of-- but this was my city. He was from Belgrade. I grew up in this city. I knew everybody and everything.

So what were your thoughts? You just said, this is my city, and now I have to leave it.

Yeah. Well, you leave it. You just-- my father said we have to leave. I said, well-- I remember going up to the mountains, but I knew that in the mountains, the partisans was my uncle, was my cousin or-- I mean, this was a positive thing. Tito was very good. So we carried blankets, carried a few things, very few.

Was this right after you had gone down and the boat didn't come?

A couple of days later. Didn't-- couldn't get off. Everything was packed to go. We thought we were bringing a lot, no. Now, we are walking. There's no war-- walking up the mountains and walking for about a day or two.

Stopping, putting blankets down and sleeping. And we going up the mountains.

Who was in your group?

My uncle across the street who was-- wanted to see his daughter. An aunt, Beppo, my uncle Beppo Finz-- Beppo Finzi, my Aunt Sida, some of my-- some of-- nobody my age, actually.

But it was all relatives.

No, were friends-- friends, people that lived around us.

About how big a group was it?

Oh, it was, I think, hundreds of people. We're not all Jews that were leaving. Everybody was going up to the mountains because Germans are coming.

Anybody that had been remotely a sympathi-- people-- oh, very interesting. I told you about my father closing up the shop with those Italians. There they were-- the son and the daughter who were now maybe a couple of years older or a year older, they were going up the mountains. They weren't going to stay for the Germans.

People were fearful of Germans. It was a whole group. It wasn't anything Jewish. It was almost like droves of people were walking up the mountain.

Did you take-- what did you take personally with you from your home in Split?

I personally don't remember taking anything except a blanket and maybe a couple of clothes.

Did you have a favorite doll or favorite toy?

I had a doll-- I had dolls. I had a buggy, a fancy buggy doll. It didn't ever occur-- it just didn't even come to mind to take it. You had to take things that were-- for survival.

You even knew that as a 10-year-old.

Yes. Oh, by all means. Now, my mother, interestingly enough, Sandy showed it, the Seder plate, took her Mezuzah from the house, removed it, and took one spoon of her silver. And Sandy had to stay there a couple nights a few nights ago.

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Sandy said, what would you take? And I said-- she asked me-- I said, I know what my mother took. She took one spoon as part of her house, and she took one-- her Mezuzah.

[? And ?] Sandy has, and all beat up by now. I think she just has a part of it. And that's all we took-- and blankets. And we held onto those blankets till my mother died.

Those were the blankets from home. They were all moth eaten. They were wool heavy blankets. But we-- those blankets we slept on.

And we took a few extra things, because my-- like clothing and-- because my father was walking. So he was a strong man. So we would walk, and we walked for two days and made it up to the mountains someplace. And--

Your mother's health by now is good. She had recuperated from the gallbladder.

Oh, yeah, yeah. She had had gallbladder, yeah. My mother was fine. My father was fine. We got to this small village.

The name of the village? No?

It was up in the mountains someplace. And--

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