

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Tilda Finzi Cohen. This is tape number two, side A. And you had been talking before about leaving Split, going up into the mountains.

And just to backtrack a little bit, you slept outside. What was that like?

Well, it was September. We had the blankets. I slept-- my mother, my father, and I slept there. And it was kind of almost like camping out.

Had you ever slept outside before?

I had never slept outside before. I never had camped out before. So it was interesting. It was kind of-- I don't remember being afraid. That is the interesting part. Now, the fear came when my father left.

OK. Now, you're at the village.

At the village. And they collect the partisans and I was seeing all the men have to go to fight. They have to be militarized and trained, and we got to take-- and we said goodbye to my father, and my uncle, the one that I used to take food to jail, Uncle Chaim. And one of my grandsons is-- has his middle name.

And we said goodbye and they left for the front. I don't know for where, but-- and mother and I were left there alone. Mostly women were left there.

Did you say anything special to your father, or did he say anything special to you when he left?

Don't remember. I don't think so. I think maybe may God bless you, something my father said to me. No, it wasn't anything. There was no-- and they-- he left. And about a week later, we were up there kind of managing, living, sleeping outside with a lot of other women and children and getting food. And it was OK. I mean, it was--

What did you do during the day?

Play with the kids, just play with the children.

These are non-Jews and Jews mixed together?

Definitely. Definitely. Because people had escaped. They were escaping the Germans. So, yeah, it was-- though, I think we were in a small Jewish group, kind of a small Jewish group from Split. We were kind of taking care of each other. The women were taking care of each other.

Was there a leader of this group?

I don't remember this, the leader. Now, the command of that small town was under the command of a cousin of my father, Jachel Finzi, who was a big commander, and he had escaped. He had escaped from Split year-- a couple of years before and was up in the partisans. And he was commander.

And actually, I think he even took-- he was going to Split and foolishly enough-- can you believe it, he has gone back to Split. And foolishly enough, he asked my mother if she wanted to pick up some things from the house. And she left me there alone.

She went back to Split.

For a couple of hours, because he was going by car. He was a big officer. But the other-- on the other hand, there were so many, many-- they could have shot that car. And my mother would have been shot.

And I was left-- but my mother came back that evening and brought, I think, sweaters and coat just because she felt like, OK, this is-- she came back that evening. And about a week later, I don't know how or why, and if the cousin Jachel Finzi had anything to do with that, my father came back. They said that he was too old.

Was 1943, my father was 43 years old. They said he was a little too old for being in the mountains and so forth. My uncle, of course, Chaim stayed. He was younger. And of course, we never saw him again. He died fighting with the partisans.

Did your father talk about what he did in those few weeks?

They said they trained him-- they were training them, the military training. That's all. He didn't-- by the week, I think, a week and a half. Because by this time-- and--

Had you been in contact with him after he left?

No. No, no, no. They were up in the mountains. There were no telephones, nothing, no. We didn't know where he went, what--

How did your mother handle that?

Now, she was very upset. That's when my mother was very sad and cry, was very, very fearful what was going to happen to us, what was going to happen to him. The separation was very hard.

How did that affect you?

You become the parent, that's what you become, really. You start taking care of your parents, your mother. Somehow you have to be the one that makes her feel better and [? safer ?].

My father came back within a week or so to-- something. I don't understand-- I don't remember the time sequence. But from the time we left home till the time we went to Italy. And then they started saying that the Germans were coming after-- we have to move further.

Then it was the decision was made that all the Jews-- Tito made the decision. And did my cousin-- did my father's cousin have anything to do with that? I don't know. But either-- oh, by the way, this commander, my father went back to Yugoslavia a year before he died in '78, visited with this cousin who had become a big professor. He was an architect of the University of Sarajevo.

And I have this beautiful handmade bag that he gave to my father for me. And it's hanging in my living room. So it has-- but I don't know if he had anything to do at the time that he was hiding in Split. Before he went into the partisans, my parents had helped him with food, with clothing, and so-- but it was a natural thing to do.

What were your thoughts about Tito?

Very positive. He was-- he saved the Jews. Yeah, he-- here he-- some of them he wanted to fight, but they wanted to fight with him. And so here he took all the Jews-- just the Jews-- and said, we're going to transfer him to-- transfer the Jews to the islands near the-- in Dalma-- on the Dalmatian Coast and try to get them as far away from the Germans as possible.

Then it was decided that the men were going to walk-- the men and the strong women were going to walk through the mountains back to the coast up north or south of Split. I guess, north. But-- so that we could catch the little boats at night and start going from one island to the next.

The women and children were going to go by trucks, camion. And so my dad, we said goodbye, OK. He's going to walk

and we are going to go by-- and we could take some of our things, so that gave us more things.

We were carrying the things. He was walking. Took blankets, took this, took that. The few things, I mean, maybe a valise or two in a small luggage since my mother had gone down by car, remember, was-- and we went down.

And now we're going to the coast. We went down the mountains from where we were, back on the road towards Split. And now we're going to go towards the coast up.

And they got the message somehow that the Germans were advancing. So they dropped us all off, took the tracks towards Split, and said to us to walk the other direction away from Split. And they were going to get some of their people. There were-- they were afraid of going to be caught by the Germans.

When you say they were going, and they told you to--

The partisans, partisans told us, OK? This is the end, walk towards the-- you're going to get there, just keep on walking maybe three or four hours, you'll get there.

This is the group of women and children.

Yes. And they dumped us there, left us there, and they were going towards the city trying to pick up some of their soldiers, some of the people in the city they were, because the city was being invaded or they were occupied by the Germans. They didn't expect it quite to happen so fast.

So we started walking. Of course, we couldn't carry because my dad didn't carry anything. So there we were dump-- we dumped things, and we arrived only with the blankets and very few things. In the meantime, my poor father arrived there expecting us to be there. We were not.

Because they were the walkers. They walked through the mountain. And he was-- so as we are walking, and walking, and walking, we see this man walking towards us after three or four hours.

He was walking, looking for us, feeling that we had to come from that direction. He knew the direction. Of course, we had dumped many-- but things were not important. That was not important. We were very happy to be reunited.

Even to a 10-year-old, things were not important?

Excuse me?

Even to a 10-year-old?

Absolutely. It didn't even occur. It just-- it was not even-- it's a strange thing, no, absolutely not.

How did you know that as a 10-year-old?

Somehow, I knew we were-- the Germans were coming in behind us. I mean, we didn't want to get caught. So we wanted to walk faster. And things-- we couldn't, absolutely.

Did you stay close to your mother?

Definitely stayed close to my mother. But all the groups stayed close to each other walking, I think. Some of the older women walking more slowly. We were walking a little faster.

But we were also worried about my father, because how worried will he be? It's always how worried will he be for us? It's an interesting thing.

Were women helping other women?

I think they were encouraging, not helping. You couldn't carry someone else's things, because you couldn't carry your own things. But I think we were encouraging.

If somebody got tired and sat down, you said, come on, get up. We got to-- better go. You don't want to stay behind. Come on.

In that case, we were carrying each other-- yeah, we were helping each other.

Did people share food?

I don't remember of food at all. I don't remember being hungry. I don't remember food at all during the trip. I don't remember that.

I think we didn't have-- we didn't probably have food. But we were just walking. It was not more than three hours or four. And when we got to the village where the-- there where we-- my father then met us and we walked.

There was food. There were coffee shops. I mean, by coffee shop, I mean, restaurant, little places.

Is this on the coast?

On the coast. And then we had to wait.

What was the name of the village, do you know?

I don't. All these places you were there just-- it was just one of these little, tiny [INAUDIBLE]. And we had to wait till night time so that we could take this little boat to go to one of the islands.

And it was night and I had had-- we just got on this damn boat, a little rowboat or something like that, and rode. I don't know for how many hours, but probably as soon as it turned dark we went. And then got there about 12:00, 1:00 in the morning, 2:00 in the morning. I don't remember.

You said your father caught up with you.

Yes.

Did you ever think he would not?

Well, basically, we felt my father and my aunt and uncle who walked were-- they were much safer than we were. They were in partisan territory. We were kind of going down, because I think we were not worried about him. I think he was the one who was worried about us.

He realized either we were caught, something happened. Because we should have been there by the time he arrived. Because they were walking. Was an eight hour-- it was a seven, eight hour walk.

But then they started early in the morning. They expected us to be there and waiting for them. This was-- and then I think started my mother had not wanted to go by.

She wanted to go walk, but he was worried about me, a 10-year-old walking again. But we went to one of the islands, and basically, things then at the islands, we were.

Did you help row?

Oh, no, it wasn't a row. It was like maybe a small motorboat. It felt like a real boat with a motor. And there were a few boats, and we all got to one of the islands, and then we were put up in one of the schools. The partisans had occupied this.

And we were put up in some schools. And there was a big place to eat, one of these mess halls. And I slept in the school rooms and just-- and our blankets.

And then the next night, we were transferred to another small island, I think BraĀ B-R. the Island of BraĀ . And I remember having Rosh Hashanah in one of these islands. And I was telling Sandy last night, we were talking about something.

Maybe-- I remember that we-- my mother prepared something and took it to a bakery, bakery ovens. You could put it in the oven in the bakery and bake something. And some of the restaurant, like-- it was a small town. We just ate outside in the restaurant outdoors.

But ate our food because it was Rosh Hashanah. It's-- we still-- the feeling was there. And I don't know, we spent maybe a week there. And it was like the vacation islands now. It's on the sea. It was fun. It was fun.

It was-- we were afraid, but the Germans would come. Then again--

Did you have freedom of movement?

Complete freedom. Well, you didn't want to move because in case they said let's take you to another island. Freedom of movement, the partisans were-- we were-- we could do anything. We-- I mean, the partisans gave you freedom we didn't have.

Did you feel that they were your real protectors?

Yes. I really felt that they were protected. So much so I had some knee problem and one night I started crying that my knees hurt from-- somehow, something-- my knees hurt terribly. I don't know. I was crying.

I don't think so with the growing pains or was it something to do with my tonsils that the operation took place a little too late. Because I didn't-- it was-- oh, and Sandy asked me why didn't I have-- where did I have my operation? I said, in the doctor's office.

He says, Ma, they took your tonsils off in the doctor's office? I said, yeah, Jews were not my-- I said, well, Jews weren't allowed in the hospital. Didn't for-- they forgotten that.

Now, when was that?

That was probably 19-- early 1943. But some of this infection had gone into my joints, it was a type of rheumatic fever, I think. So much my knees were hurting and my-- and I remember arriving in one of the islands and one night.

And one of the partisans was taking us to the school, one of the school. And I started crying. And he says, [NON-ENGLISH]? Why is this little one crying?

And my mother says, her knees are hurting. Her knees are hurting. And he says, she shouldn't sleep at that school. Let me go and check if somebody has a room.

So he knocked on somebody's house that he knew, says, do you have a room for a couple, the little girl is sick. And we stayed there for four or five, six nights-- I don't remember-- in a beautiful room, a beautiful garden. That beautiful room-- I mean, relatively beautiful room.

And so they were definitely our protectors. Tito's partisans were definitely our protector. And then the last trip was to

the Island of Vis in the middle of the Adriatic-- not middle, practically middle of the Adriatic.

And we were there for-- don't remember how many days. The whole thing from September 11 till October something. Because for Yom Kippur-- what-- oh, tell me how many days? 10 days? Oh, my God, so it was very quick. We were on one island already for Rosh Hashanah.

Or on the second island maybe for Rosh Hashanah. So in Vis we couldn't been very long because we arrived in Bari, Italy a day before, or two days before Yom Kippur. So it wasn't-- and then--

How did you-- how did you get to Bari?

OK. The Italia-- the, I think the Allies had sent the ship over to Vis to bring the wounded, the-- Tito's partisan's wounded people wounded and with the frozen limb. I mean, all the-- they were taking them to allied hospitals in Bari. Bari was already established.

So what happened--

Bari is a refugee camp on the Adriatic Coast of Italy.

Bari is-- Bari is a city, not a--

I meant a city in which the camp was established.

Yeah. They were camps, refugee camps. But basically, Bari was a city in the big port, major port. And the Allies had landed there, or gotten there. And basically, they were sending a ship over to Vis to bring the pris-- not the prisoners, the wounded people, the partisan soldiers wounded that-- so they could be treated in allied hospital.

And at that point, somehow the decision came that the bottom of the boat were-- was going to be filled with these Jewish people and sent to Bari.

Do you know who made that decision?

No. I think some of the partisan leadership made the decision that they didn't want to deal with the Jews being caught, the ones that had escaped. And they were going to send them to Italy to the Allies. So they filled the boat with as many wounded, and we flew a Red Cross flag floating out-- what is it-- sail.

It was a Red Cross flag so that we couldn't be on top deck ever except at night, because they couldn't see there were people there. They were just-- it was almost like a hospital ship. But we could come out at night and so-- but we had to be under.

Do you know about how many people were on that boat?

I'd say about 40, 50. I don't really.

Total.

Total. No, no, no. I'm talking about Jewish people. Oh, no, no. I don't never saw the pris-- prisoners were in a completely-- not prisoners, the wounded were in a completely different area.

They work like a hospital. And we were just under whatever-- what is it called, the underneath the ship? God, I don't know what it is. Anyway, whatever it is. But we could come out at night.

When it was dark.

When it was dark so that if somebody was flying a plane, the Germans were flying plane, they were hoping that they would not bomb or something a Red Cross, a hospital ship.

Now, what was your state of mind at this point?

I really don't know what my state of mind. I don't-- the state of mind was there were kids there. We used to play. There was food. We weren't particularly hungry or anything. It was not good food, but it was something.

And again, you stayed with your parents.

Both my parents were with me. I was with both my parents. And it was-- we're coming to a new-- was an overnight trip, I think, or day, something-- day and a night or something like-- it wasn't very long. The ship was going very small.

OK. Another thing, the motor was-- they had-- they were sending it to Italy because the motor was having problems. So they were sending the wounded, the motor, I mean, everybody was sick. And--

Would you describe yourself at that time as being an optimistic child?

It's very interesting you should ask that, because I mean, considered always a pessimist. Everybody in my family thinks I'm a pess-- I always look at the dark side of things. I wonder why.

It seems like you've adjusted to these changes as a young child as you were going through them.

Yes, I adjust to changes easily. I learn languages easily. I-- and all this. But I always look-- I really don't remember.

Just being together with my parents, my mother and father, meant so much. Just being-- because there were a lot of people there without their spouses. So that already families had been fragmented in different directions. To me, having my mother and father-- being an only child, my mother and father were my world. So I didn't--

Were there other children there without any parents?

No, there were no children-- it was-- without-- there were many children with one parent. Some parents had been taken to concentration camp from other cities. You see, from Sarajevo, the mother and the child had escaped.

Some had gone-- younger people than my parents had been taken-- had stayed in the army fighting with the partisans, with the Tito's partisans so that-- so I really don't remember as being-- I was not sad. I was glad to be leaving someplace where the Allies were. Can't believe what we thought of the Americans and the Allies.

It was like these were the saviors. They were going to come and save us in Split if they ever came. So we were going to them. I mean, we were going to be fine.

And we arrived in Bari, landed in Bari. And there were-- the first time I ever saw a Black person. And they were there handing out corned beef cans, handing out chocolates as we-- and the boat to us.

As you're getting off, you mean.

No, almost-- they had to-- no, they were somehow reaching up, throwing these things. It was like we were-- and--

These are allied soldiers.

Allied soldiers, mostly Americans.

Did you know any English at that point?

No, none whatsoever, not a word. And took us to the-- some school. It's always the school because schools get closed during war. So the schools are used for different purposes.

So here we go to a school. They give us straw to sleep on. We have our blankets, though.

And-- but then the cots came. They gave us cots, and we slept in schools. The food was like army type of food, or whatever.

But it was fine. We were--

Are you still wearing the same clothes over and over again?

Very few clothes, probably maybe a couple of pairs of underwear. The clothes were basically the same. Maybe had a change of blouse.

Then my mother encountered somebody from Split who said, the pajama, I remember. And she says, the pajama top, do you want a pajama for her? My mother said, pajama for her, the pajama top can be a blouse.

So already people were coming and we were sharing clothes. And somehow things were-- we were in a strange city, but there were a lot of refugees. We ran into people we had known from Yugoslavia, people that had come-- remember that first boat that left and that we didn't make the second, couldn't get on.

There were people there and we started sharing. I think they land-- loaned my father some money. Maybe very little, but just a little. And we were starting kind of-- I think my father even didn't want to be in a camp. So we would be halfway in a camp.

And it was interesting. It was just not the danger, it was a strange place. I mean, there was always-- I wonder where my parents got privacy. I wonder. But I always shared a room with them.

And I remember one night, one afternoon-- this maybe shouldn't be said, but I think it should. One of the friends said, you know what? I'm going to take all the kids to the movies. And I wonder why he was taking all the children to the movies.

What-- he was taking all the children were going to the movies. He was going to sacri-- I'm taking all the children to the movie. And we all went to the movies, about four or five of us, children younger than I, and I-- about three or four.

And we are in the middle of the movie, and there is a horrendous noise. A bomb fell. They were bombing the city. Then from the movie, we went to a shelter.

And it was the kind of thing that you think back now when there was the all clear, we walk into the street and everything is glass. You walking-- all the windows had been broken of all the houses, all the buildings. And my poor mother is waiting for us to come home. And my father-- it's just-- and I was worried that I was sure that my parents were not alive. I felt like I was 10 years old.

And-- but they were fine, and I was fine. And we started living in Bari. It was--

Was this explosion when the Germans dropped the bombs and there was-- on ships in the harbor and the poison gas exploded?

This was-- I was there for the poison gas. This was later-- this was, I think, this was more like in '43, the end of '43, probably at the end of '43.

Was when--

And the bomb, the gas, the-- what kind of gas?

The poison gas.

The poison gas. There was name for it. That was, I think, in '44. You have it differently?

It's listed as December '43 when--

OK. Might have been-- it listed as December '43?

Yeah. December 2, 1943. But this was another explosion.

This was-- this was just a bombing.

Let's talk a little bit about-- so when you first got to Bari, were you moved around, or did you just-- were you taken to one place and you stayed?

Well, we were taken to a school. We were free to do anything we wanted to do, anything-- I mean, within the city. There was no--

So there wasn't-- it wasn't a refugee camp with a boundary.

There was a refugee camp that you could go to, because you couldn't support yourself. The refugee camp was not that you had to go. It was a camp that if you didn't have money, you went there and you were given food and shelter, and maybe some clothes.

But my father had ran into some friends who loan-- lend him some money that he-- whenever he-- lended in the sense of give. And it was the kind of thing that we actually--

So you lived in the town of Bari, not within the refugee camp limits.

Yeah, for a while. Then later things got a little bit more-- but basically, we always had a place to live. He rented a one room in somebody's house. And we lived with this woman whose husband was a prisoner of war, non-Jewish, and-- for a few months.

Then the bombs got very bad. They started bombing and we got fearful, and we went to a small village around Bari and rented a room with a few other families. And then rented a house. Actually, a house with three or four other families.

And we were just hiding-- not hiding-- basically, hiding from the bombs, not hiding. And my father used to go in the City of Bari every day and work on the black market selling that little gold, selling cigarettes, selling something to make money to support us.

How did you react to the bombs?

That's-- I think for many, many years, I was very afraid of loud noises and thunder. I think till my children were born, I was afraid of-- very fearful of thunder. I still maybe now-- no, no longer do I react. But I think I'm on beta blockers to keep my blood pressure down so I'm a little calmer.

But I think I am-- I am still fearful. They always say, calm down, my family, calm down, ma. Don't overreact.

What did you do as a child when you-- if you heard bombs?

What did I do as a child when I heard bombs?

Did you run to your parents? Were there shelters? What happened?

We went in-- we always went to shelters. And I think stayed very quiet. You-- I think it mostly internalized this, the fear is internalized. You don't want your parents to worry about you. It's this constant concern for your parents not to be worried about you and always making them feel comfortable.

Everybody was trying to make the other person feel comfortable. That's what I remember. I don't remember screaming or anything like that.

Where were the shelters?

Oh, they were usually underneath the houses, and inside the buildings there were shelters. But that's why we left Bari because it was somewhat uncomfortable. And I think the fear was that we had survived the war.

Almost-- we felt we were liberated. The war was-- and for all intents and purposes-- over for us. And we wanted now not to be bombed by the Germans.

What did you do on a typical day?

Typical day, play, help my mother cook, and stuff like that. Any-- in one, it's very interesting. In one of the houses we rented, there were books and I started-- I missed school.

I started looking at grammar books, learning Italian better. So much so that I am such a fanatic about grammar. I even find the mistake in the published letter from the Holocaust Museum. They didn't use the subjunctive and I reacted to it violently.

So I started to actually concentrate. I found grammar books and started very interested in grammar. I don't know why.

Were you picking up any English?

Not yet, not at that time. But then now, I remember this thing is later what you're talking about. I remember it as a year almost later what you talk about where there was a mustard gas explosion. But I remembered because we were back near Bari, and I was already going to a house school. Somebody was-- the schools were not open, but I was going to a house school.

A teacher who was running a school from her house and had like two grades, not Jewish, nothing. And I started going taking these private lessons. And my mother was paying for the school. Schools were not open.

And again, then gave an exam. They were just to-- and I was admitted to the middle school. I started going middle-- but that's when I remembered the mustard gas explosion with so many dead bodies.

And I even at some point wondered if some of the health problems that my family had were not-- because my father was in the city. It was like a black rain. It was horrible.

My mother was-- and help me with my train of thought. I'm lost.

Well, the Germans had bombed some ships in the harbor and that's where this poison gas all over.

There were a lot of dead bodies cover-- they were just taking them by trucks. You could see was arms and legs. And I was at this woman's school in the city.

Now, there is no transportation. I was supposed to take a tram home to my mother. I don't know where my father is. And somehow, the trams were not running.

Everything was-- it was a big-- I walked home by myself. And I was what, 11 12?

How does a child adjust to seeing a sight like that, of bodies all over the place?

It wasn't all over the place. It was in these trucks passing by. I didn't even know they were dead. But I knew they were dead because they were on top of each other. Was arms-- and I thought all these people were wounded. But I didn't know. I didn't-- we do-- we did feel that everything was covered in black rain, we called it.

So did your family stay in Bari then?

Yeah, we stayed on.

Because some people left because of the poison in the air.

No, we stay. We actually were not in the city. We were not living in the city. We were living maybe five miles away.

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection interview with Tilda Finzi Cohen. This is tape number two, side B. Let's talk about your experience in Spring of 1944 with Passover.

I think maybe we'll backtrack just a little. While we were in Bari, before the bomb, during that period, I think, when one of the bombs fell, my father ran into someone who was Israel, a British soldier, appeared to be a British soldier, who started questioning him, asking him-- questioning him in the sense, where are you from? I think maybe my father appeared Jewish to him.

And he said he was an Israeli that was in the language. He was from the Ukraine originally, so they had the language more or less in common, which was Ukrainian and Serbo-Croatian is somewhat similar. They could communicate.

In my father spoke some German, and this man spoke some German. So this became kind of a-- Chaim was his name. We never could locate him when we went to Israel. But we don't know what happened because he was sent to the front, or something.

But he was very good to us. Army clothes that we made, and this is how we got the contact with the Israelis. And then we were in a small town, in one of the small towns in Bitetto, near Bari.

And there was a whole contingent of Israeli. There were actually map maker. They made maps for the-- for the-- OK. And they were having a seder. So they wanted the youngest child that could read. They had to say-- ask the fourth question in Hebrew.

So why they chose me, I was the one who could read-- not Hebrew-- could read. And they were going to teach it to me. And so every day for a week or two or three, I was going to this big army school-- they had taken over a school-- where they would-- the head of this thing was teaching me "ma nishtana ha-la."

And then I was put on a chair, on a table, and had to say this "ma nishtana" now because now, all the Israeli soldiers from the whole area came to this seder. Because this was a whole-- some were dispersed, few here, few there. This was the map contingent, the map making. I don't know. It was a whole group of Israeli soldiers with a British Army.

I was going to say, this is the Palestinian brigade of the British army that you're talking about. Now, did you say this was in the town or in Bari?

No, this was in an outskirt, because they were, I think, in a small town, Bitetto. And so we became friends with all these-- the Jews and these-- and of course, we were invited to the seder. And I had to say for-- I felt like there were hundreds of people, probably there were, maybe there were hundred or-- but there was a big, many tables. Because all the other Israelis said there was very positive.

So immediately, we were already in the Jewish and we were in contact with the Israeli soldiers and-- well, the British soldiers, which are part of the Israeli brigade. So it was wonderful. And whenever the children like the other night managed, it just-- it feels like I am taken back many, many, many years when I was maybe 12 years old.

It's a wonderful story, yeah. So then you were in this town. And what about schooling, or what did you do during the day?

No, mostly helped in the house. I helped my mother cook, help clean. Unfortunate, had very little schooling in the sense of really formal schooling. And in three different languages.

Something that it's kind of sad. And-- but I don't think it's particularly noticeable at times. But self-taught, I did go to the-- I went to college here in the United States.

What about the high holidays, the previous-- you had gotten to Bari just before Yom Kippur. Do you remember that first Yom Kippur in Bari?

I remember vividly this first Yom Kippur. The first Yom Kippur, we had finally gotten into-- my father had rented something, but it wasn't a room. It was a big hall where they had a regular double sized bed, big bed.

And with one of these-- what do you put-- if you want to separate a room?

Screen.

A screen. With the screens around the bed. And we had to start our fast. But there was no place to go. We didn't know where to go.

But remember, the soldiers had given us the corned beef sandwich. I don't know if it was kosher or not, but we started-- somehow they had handed some matzo from some place. So we started our fast in this bed. Behind the screen was a can of corned beef and matzo.

And we didn't know-- we didn't even question it, but we did start to fast. And we fasted the whole-- my parents fasted the whole day. I don't think I did.

And you had matzo at the time of Yom Kippur?

Not matzo. What am I saying? Forgive me. It must have been some bread. Now, see-- yes, OK. No, it must have been something, but I remember eating the corned beef-- can of corned beef that you didn't need a can opener, because--

The key that opened it.

And some bread probably. Wasn't matzo, it was--

Did you have matzo at the time of Passover in '44 with a Palestinian brigade?

Oh, definite-- that was probably-- oh, yeah, this was a regular Swiss soup and everything. Matzo was-- it was a definite. I mean, they had the whole thing. It was-- it was [INAUDIBLE]. I mean, it was complete Passover, yeah.

And so life went on for you in this manner of helping your mother.

Yes. I'm helping my mother. And somehow we were staying in a house where there were books. I don't understand. The wife was a teacher or something. And we were renting this place. And they had left the books.

And I was just reading a lot and trying to actually learn Italian, the grammar. How a 12-year-old does this, I don't know. But I'm known as knowing that Italian grandmother. I mean, it's one of these things.

And then I took an exam to put me in what they consider first year of high school, which was--

Now, is the war still going on in Europe, or has the war--

I'm not-- basically, the end of '44, and things had normalized by then. It hasn't ended, but the schools are being given back to the people. So the schools are opening and they-- whoever wants to come and get-- take an exam to make up, see if they learned anything through this year.

And I basically am behind. I am 12, I think. 1944, nineteen-- I was born 1930-- 11 something. And by 19-- by maybe 1945, I gave this exam where said that I finished the four years of school. So I was one year behind. And went to what's considered scuola media, middle school, or kind of where I started going to school regularly.

Well, tell me what it was like when the war was over in Europe in the spring of '45.

What was it like? All the refugee-- all the people that had escaped started coming back. It was-- some people didn't, but how we connected with the family, I don't understand. That's what I still question.

They all came to-- they knew Bari was the center where people are, so everybody came to Bari. And here my mother found a brother. The brother was with his sister and his daughter and his wife. And they came to Bari.

Another-- who else came? Trying to think. It's funny. Yeah, somewhere-- yeah, OK, so they didn't come to Bari, they went straight back to Yugoslavia.

Another brother and my father's brother from Yugoslavia, who was in the army who lost his wife and his child, he came. But he came only on business. He was already in the Yugoslavian government.

So things are starting-- started to normalize. And the fam--

Was there any celebration when the war was over?

I don't think so. I don't remember any celebration. I really don't. Because now, we realize the camp-- people are starting coming back from the camps that we heard about all the atrocity. How many and everybody who had been hoping that somebody would come back never came back.

So there was no celebration that I remember at all, no. I think there was a lot of sadness because we were realizing what had happened. We didn't-- we were coping against hope, I think, that some of the people would come back, like my mother had an older sister that had died during childbirth and left two children, and always felt guilty that somehow she didn't save these children. And of course, they never came back.

And so those are the kind of thing-- I don't remember celebrating. I remember more of kind of getting-- the parents getting-- having a few drinks and eating before when the hope was still there. People would congregate, have wine, and cook. And I mean, the hope was still there.

But then there were also some people that came back from concentration camp whose wives had found other men. And this was a very painful thing. And we had friends like that. The wives-- it was a very difficult time, very painful. That's all I remem-- I mean, there was no great enthusia-- I don't remember this. It's just the end of the war.

Did you stay in Bari after the war was over?

We stayed in Bari. And actually, things normalize. My father couldn't find a job.

Why did you stay in Bari? Why didn't he want to go back to Yugoslavia?

Oh, well, the situation in Yugoslavia was bad. My uncle and aunt and cousin that had kind of-- the other sister that had come from the northern part of Italy, my uncles Solomon Montilio, and [? Sari, and ?] [? Kai, ?] and [? Lea, ?] they went back to Yugoslavia directly from Bari. And they wrote us and said the situation was very difficult.

Don't come. You're well off where you are. Stay where you are. Don't come.

Did you want to go back to Yugoslavia, your hometown?

By this time-- by this time, I had been in Italy. I spoke Italian fluently. No desire. I was a teenager, 13. I was very good in school. I-- this was I belong. I found-- no, no desire at all.

Did you feel Italian or Yugoslavian?

You see, the Ustases the whole thing I had never-- I still do. Croats are like-- so I was not that thrilled. I think I wanted to go to Israel. But then I felt more Jewish than Yugo-- I didn't feel Yugoslavian.

And we were considering going to Israel. Some of the families from Yugoslavia went to Israel. And they were having a very difficult-- very difficult time, initially, working as maids, college grad, university grad working. So they suggest, don't come. Stay where you are. Stay where you are.

So we stayed in Italy as long as we could. And stayed in Bari until 1948. My father still worked on the black market dealing in dollars and gold and stuff like that. And--

And you went to school. Did you do anything else?

I went to public school. I had a Jewish group that met in the--

A Jewish youth group?

Jewish Youth group. We met in that little building or something occasionally. Had actually Jewish friends, a group of Jewish friends and non-Jewish friends. Not mixed. I had a Jewish-- group of Jewish friends and a group of non-Jewish friends from school.

And did a lot of Jewish things-- Purim and just-- like there was a Jewish congregation. There is no Jewish congregation now. There was no Jewish congregation before 1943. But in that-- because there were so many Jews in Bari.

And then towards 1946, '47, '48, the city started-- the Jews started leaving. They were-- the refugees started leaving. The Italians, who had been refugees, they come from-- can come from the north. They went back north.

So basically, the city became-- as far as Jewishly, my parents wanted more. But I went there to this middle school for three years and really learned Italian and did very well. Especially, in school. And then went to the-- we moved to Milan.

Why to Milan?

Why Milan, specifically? I think there was many Jews there marry Yugoslavians there, Jewish Yugoslavian. We always talking about Jewish at this point. Now, the Jewish thing. And this was a difficult period for me.

Milan, it's interesting, because now I'm starting to feel I want-- my parents want to put me in day school. Now, I have to deal with learning Hebrew.

Jewish day school.

Jewish day school. And they already been-- and the war has just ended three years before. So some of the students are

really good, plus I am now competing with smart Jews, and with Italians who are not so smart. And was a very-- and I got sick with-- it was just a bunch of things. It's not--

It's the middle of adolescence, also. You're 15 and a half, 16, yeah.

Yes, yes, yes. And I developed pains in my stomach, have emergency appendectomy. I mean, the whole thing. So I lose time in school and I'm behind in school, and I'm behind in Hebrew.

And I just couldn't-- this is the first time I failed in my life. It was a very painful thing. I did not pass two of the subjects, and I had to go in September. This is the painful thing. It is funny.

It was one of those things that just destroyed. Somehow I was-- thought of myself as being able to do every--

You had also lived through very demanding times before then.

Well, this-- I was like the best student in class. And you-- you're the big shot in class all the time. And all at once, you're behind, and it's very painful. And I changed schools. Left to keep the day school. And did wonderfully again in regular-- but I couldn't deal with the school program. Because I had so much catching up to do. And--

It was something your parents understood.

Oh, yeah. There was no-- no forceful. I mean, it's basically-- it's funny, I directed my own life. They allowed me this. I came to the States.

Then 1950, the decision was made that we would come to the States, as I told you. My father want to make sure I was 17, that I would not marry a non-Jewish boy, because I was already dating somebody from Med school who was not. A young man that was going to Med school who was not.

At that time, you dated guys that were five years, six years older. They liked young girls. He was very serious.

He was not Jewish.

And my father decided it's time to go to the United States. So we-- and every-- many people were leaving. Milan was a good experience. I made friends. I had friends, but it was painful.

The school was not-- it was very demanding. I was not prepared. The southern schools, just like here, the southern school was not as good.

I was-- they had already been functioning there for three years. The Hebrew school was very-- the day school was very demanding. And came to the States.

What did you think about that, coming to the United States when your parents presented you with that?

By the way, I must admit, in Bari already, during the war, my mother got a private teacher for me to learn English.

Because she knew that maybe in the future--

Everybody had to speak English at this point. The future was English. So I had a private tutor that came on twice a week with an hour to teach me English.

Were you able to pick that up?

I guess I did, but I didn't know at the time that I did. It was painful. It was painful in the sense I hated the teach-- normal things. But I did, I took my lessons faithfully.

And I continued always with my private English. That's partly why when I came to the States, I spoke not well, but I spoke. I understood a little.

What was your thoughts when your parents told you, you would be coming to the United States? Here, you're moving, again, this is a child has moved and moved and moved.

OK. It's a new language. I know a little bit. I've been prepared in that way. Some of my friends had already left-- some for Venezuela, some to Argentina. Some of my Jewish friends, the ones from Yugoslavia are the ones, yeah. My Italian Jewish friends were staying. It was--

To an adolescent, friends are very important. And here you say friends went to all different parts of the world. Did that depress you? Did that-- did you miss them?

It was part of life. It was-- it was just part of life. But when I-- we come to the States and I knew there were a few people here. So I was thinking, well, there is [INAUDIBLE], there's this, there's that. I'll manage. And as soon as I arrived, we were still put off the ship in a school.

What ship did you come on?

On the Vulcania. And it was not there-- again, my father didn't know I was starting a new world was a transport ship. No, he booked passage. He was going to come as a gentleman, he said. A little bit of money he had saved a few. He's going to come as a gentleman.

Oh, I'm so sorry, Gail. I scratched you. I'm sorry.

And we came and-- but HIAS met us at the boat.

What was your first sight in the United States?

I think the Statue of Liberty as you come in. And then they met us, HIAS met us.

Did that mean anything to you seeing the Statue of Liberty?

To be honest, no. If-- I could be dishonest, but I'm going to be honest. Not a thing.

By that time, I was 17. I had had a ball on the crossover. I swam, I picked up American guys. I danced. I had a ball.

America seemed like a good place because the crossing was wonderful. People were paying attention to me. And I was-- I already had picked up somebody who was teaching me English on the boat. 17-year-old, yeah, it was that kind of thing.

And-- but I arrived and the-- HIAS took us to a school on Hudson Street, just horrible. And men and women sleeping separately. And my father said, this is not for us. We're going to try to find a room someplace. One-- back to one room-- one room, the three of us.

Did your parents speak English?

No, not at all.

So you were their translator.

I am now the head of the family. But I am the one that does all the trans-- is in charge of transactions, is in charge of doctors. But my uncle and aunt had come earlier, and they living on Broom Street. God, why? On Broom Street in

lower-- lower Manhattan.

Lower East Side.

Lower East Side. Thank you. But under them lives an old boyfriend from Yugoslavia from Italy, very exciting. I mean, he's there. The world is a perfect place.

And my first weekend he says, let's go to a movie. So it wasn't all bad. And we were good friends and a little more maybe-- definitely. And somehow I had to practice. This was too much of what I wanted.

And I went to high school. I registered. HIAS felt I had to go to work. I was 17. I said, I'll go to work. So I went to high school and finished high school within a year and a half.

So I was 18 and a half when I finished high school. And did well.

And you're still living with your parents.

I'm still living with my parents, of course, on West side. So I'm just-- 104th Street, West side, they rent an apartment and I helped them set it up, go to the Salvation Army-- Salvation Army furniture. But it was OK.

What was your father doing?

My father is not working. HIAS is supporting us with minimum. But I am working. I'm going to high school and I'm working as a waitress from 3:00 in the afternoon-- no, from 3:00 in the afternoon to 7:00 or 8:00 at night, and then going home, helping, and giving all my money. It was a lot of money at the time, was making \$30 a week. It was a lot of money because tips were big.

Was your mother working?

No, she couldn't find anything. So it was like-- and my father couldn't do anything. No English, no this, no that. But I was the one that was-- HIAS was helping a little, and I was bringing in the \$30 a week. Think the rent was about \$60.

And-- but I was going to high school, regular high school. Not nighttime, daytime. But I was working as a waitress and I did fine. And then I graduated from high school.

Did you want to go to college?

Yeah. I applied to Hunter, got admitted, only with the requirement that I take extra courses-- an extra repair course in English. Graduated fifth in my class. Had to-- have to boast. May I, please?

Absolutely. Absolutely. I had the highest ratings in math that anybody ever had in that high school-- 99 or something. And my teacher adored me. I was teaching for Italian.

Which high school was this?

High School of Commerce. But I went to the honor high school, Lincoln Park High School, and graduated fifth in my class. Got the only scholarship they gave.

When you were in high school and talking to the American teenagers, did you tell them about what you had gone through?

Never.

Why not?

I don't think nobody wanted to hear it. I didn't feel that was part of-- but I had, again-- again, I had to go groups. I had my group that had come from Europe, which I saw on a regular basis. And I had a group from high school.

The other kids, like this [INAUDIBLE] who was my boyfriend, he unfortunately died about 20 years, 15 years ago. He got his engineering degree and everything. He did fabulously. Went into business and everything.

But he was working and going to school at night. So I was in two different worlds. I was in a world of these kids that worked during the day, went to school at night. And I was in the high school world and college world. So--

Did you-- with your friends from Europe, did you talk to them about what you all experienced during the war?

I don't think-- we all experienced it together. We wanted to look forward, look ahead, not to look behind. I don't think we ever did.

We maybe spoke Italian sometimes, sometimes Serbo-Croatian. We even started speaking in English, which was very interesting. We were going to become part of this world.

Did the American teenagers ask you questions about your background?

They were very-- some of them were interested. I don't think too much. But I had made some friends. I can't say that I had stayed-- have stayed in touch with any in my high school.

Did your parents talk about the war years after the war was over?

It was always before and after. Before the war, and after the war.

They talk about what happened during the war?

They would say, oh, he died. It was always he-- unfortunately, he died. Here they did talk about it, but I don't think we suffered. I wanted to say we didn't suffer enough.

We didn't suffer the way the people that were in concentration camp. So it's-- I don't think we always kind of didn't-- we were not the ones that suffered at all, except for the losses, my mother lost brothers and cousins-- brothers, mostly. And-- but New York was a good place.

I was working and I was going to-- then I graduated, went to college.

Did you live at home when you were going to college?

I always lived at home. I went to Hunter-- I always-- I never left home. Please, I was helping at home, helping support the family. By this time, my father got a job in the mailroom as a mailroom clerk. And they discovered that he was very smart. He became the supervisor of the mailroom.

By then could speak English.

Some. He never spoke English very well. Till the day they died, I was the translator, the go-between. Even when they were ill, I always had to fly to New York to be there. And-- but I went--

What did you study at college?

Basically, I was interested in math, what-- I was taking math and languages, feeling that I could do something. I met my husband two years later.

Was he in college at the time, also?

He was actually in grad school in Pittsburgh.

How did you meet?

Well, one of my high school-- one of my college friends, who by college, I had made friends. Iris Feigen was a friend of mine who invited me to a party at her house. And her mother somehow fell in love with me and wanted me to meet her son.

There wasn't him. Boyd Feigen, she wanted me to meet her son. And her son try to-- he was just not my type. He was a very nice man. She said, OK, you don't want to meet my-- you don't want to take out-- go out with my son. My nephew's coming to town.

Says, you have to come to dinner. So they invited me to dinner. That was my husband. And I met him in July. I didn't want to go. I had an exam.

But anyway, that's how life is. And by January, we were married. He was 27. He was much older-- seven, eight years older. He did not want to wait. That was a mistake. I never finished college.

Oh, so you-- OK. So you got married. And then where did you-- you moved--

We lived in Pittsburgh. He finished grad school. And he started working. And we lived in Pittsburgh, then went to Denver for a year.

Then my husband became the Executive Director Jewish Family Services. He is a social worker in Atlanta, Georgia. And we moved there. And the children were born-- two in Pittsburgh and one in Atlanta.

And you have three children.

We have three daughters. And they all, thank God, doing well.

I'd like to ask you some questions-- not historical questions.

Please do.

But do you feel that you would be a different person if you hadn't gone through the experiences that you had as a child?

It's a very interesting question, Gail. That is wonderful. Because I told Sandy that I had read an article that some gay people who said if you could take a pill, would you take a pill and not be gay?

And they said, I would. And most people said, I don't think I would, because I wouldn't be the same person. Now, tell me what questions do you ask me?

Do you think you would have been a different person today if you hadn't been-- if you hadn't gone through what you did?

Very different. I don't know if I would want to be that person. That is the interesting part. I am kind of proud of speaking three or four languages.

I'm kind of proud that when I come here and seeing this husband, Elliot, has all these Europeans people, all these people from all over the world, that I fit in so easily. So would I? Well, I would have been a very different person, yes, I think.

I don't know would I've been-- would I have been happier? Probably. Would I want that? I don't know. But I would have

been very different.

Do you feel that you lost part of your childhood?

I definitely lost most of my child-- I didn't have a childhood. That's why when my children were young and teenagers, they always said they don't know why my house was always open to many kids. They could come in at 1:00 in the morning and knock on the-- knock on the children's windows, the boys-- and they were always the Jewish kids, the [INAUDIBLE], and the house was always open to them.

I think because I lived-- which is not good-- I lived my childhood through them, my teenage years. The-- it's-- I-- there was-- I loved having all these kids around the house because it was-- I could live vicariously in the freedom-- in the children's lives.

When your children were younger than that, pre-teenage-- eight, nine, 10-- when things started to get difficult for you when you were 8, 9, and 10 years old, did that-- and they reached that age, did that bring those difficult times back to you? Do you understand what I'm saying?

Oh, I know exactly. Did it-- I always heard of this is somebody who had been abused that this is with time that when the children-- I don't really think so. I was so intent-- I was really so intent. Maybe you're right. I was intent in having them do well in school. This was my obsession.

Because you felt it got you through the difficult times?

Somehow, I wanted them to do-- I don't know why, but I wanted them to do well in school. They always said, what would I have done if my children had not been bright? How would I have handled that?

And they-- I pushed hard, probably too hard. That's the only-- I think, that's the mistakes that were made, yeah, I pushed. And I see [PERSONAL NAME] rushing around home and I think to myself, is this what I created? This what-- would these my expectation?

But I think-- I've lost my train of thought. I'm sorry.

That's OK. Are there any sites today, or sounds, that remind you of the wartime years, something that triggers you to think back 50 years ago?

Anything-- I told you yesterday, the cot in this fancy, very fancy one of these books, they were these cuts-- 200, I said. I started laughing. But I mean, they were small things.

Butter, I told you about, I adored butter. And I'd die for butter. And I feel still-- I see butter, I want to smear it-- butter is something that we didn't have. Is this the kind of things? Of course, my cholesterol's 300 so I can't have butter.

But what kind of memories trigger little things? Little things transport me in a different world. Words sometime, a word that I hear, or something I cannot think in English and I'm immediately transported into another world.

You never quite-- it transported back into the war years very easily if you see a separation of families. And in TV, families are reunited somehow. That brings me back immediately somehow.

Or my husband dealt a great deal with new Americans, refugees from Russia from here. And people used to say, you would be wonderful to help them, teach them English. I teach English, too.

And I have tried. It is so painful. It brings me back right into that first few days, the pain. I see them and I see the pain of a new country of no language, of-- see, I forgotten the pain.

But I am immediately thrown back into learning about a culture, teaching my mother that the butter dish does not-- you

don't put the butter-- remember the cover of the butter dish? You have butter and you cover it. And my mother bought a butter dish and put the butter in it and left it uncovered, upward.

And all these kinds of things that we really didn't-- or my father and I walking sort of the street and eating grapefruit. Every time I think of grapefruit, peeling a grapefruit like an orange and eating it, people looking at us. Nobody I did-- now, people are eating grape-- so all these trigger memories.