

This is a continuation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection Interview with Tilda Finzi Cohen. This is tape number 3, side A. And we were talking about what brings you back to the wartime years. And you had this thought about working with newcomers now.

I can't-- I can't-- I just cannot-- I wish I could. I can't do it. It just brings me back to being a refugee again, the pain, of the relocation, of the parents, children, where the children become the parents. The whole thing is very painful. And I can't. I wish I could. I cannot do it. I can't. I don't know why. And I just find it I can't relive that. Once is enough.

What about your feelings about being Jewish because of what you went through, did it change? Or what are your thoughts about that?

There was never-- I was always felt very Jewish, always brought Judaism into-- I don't-- being Jewish-- I never went to synagogue much. I still go rarely. My husband goes every Shabbat. And he's a regular churchgoer. I don't, but definitely do not feel that-- I don't feel that being Jewish brought pain. Yes. But I would not have wanted to be anything else. It's strange. It was very important to me that my children married Jew. Extremely important. I don't know-- I think, I would have handled it if they hadn't. But all three-- you know, Jewishness is very important.

How did you convey this importance to your children?

How did I convey this? Mostly by observing the holidays I think, , making sure they went to Hebrew school, Hebrew high school. Israel was always part of it, you know. My cousins from Israel visited. I think was always part-- my mother and father were very Jewish. Father was present at Yugoslav Jewish group in the United States.

The national group?

Yes. And he never had an education. He was with all these attorneys and stuff, but he was president. And he did not have money. So he was quite well thought of. Yeah, he was the president of the Yugoslav Jews in the United States. It's mostly concentrated in New York. But it was-- you know, now it has disbanded. They're all gone.

He was extremely active. And he had groves planted in his honor in Israel. So he was always very-- so I think it was always conveyed. Jewishness was very kind always a part of our life, always.

Well, the Finzi family is a well-known name. Is he a part of a branch of the large Finzi family?

I don't know. I really don't know. Not in Italy-- you mean, he was a branch of the Yugoslavian family. The Italians, I don't think of the Italian family. But the Yugoslavian family, yeah.

Talking about Yugoslavia, so much has happened there. What are your thoughts when you--

Well, that is a very difficult question, because my views are not popular, very unpopular. I have a very hard time with Croats. Number one, I did some translations. Some people ask me to translate some letters. And they were talking, the Croats were talking, somebody who wrote this letter, probably not for all of them, that the Nazis were not-- the Nazis did not do what the Serbs did, you know, the horrible things the Serbs did. Probably it's true.

But I just find that they are using the name for the money. It's kuna. It's the same name that Ustasa used, under the Ustasa regime. So basically their flag I think is the same. I could be a mistaken. But it's a definite kind of-- the Ustasa were worse than the Nazis, much worse, because they knew who the Jews were. The Nazis couldn't quite know who the Jews were, who ident-- you know, they were the helpers. They were worse, the Ustasa were much worse than even the Nazis.

Did you have any direct confrontation with them or do your parents?

No. The only time-- it's that period in between before the Italians came, some Ustasas came to our door to put the Ustasa

flag on the windows welcoming the Germans or something. And--

Did your family keep that flag up?

No, we didn't put it up. I mean, they came-- no, no, they came to put it out of the window. We said we didn't have one. So it wasn't any-- but it was just the whole regime-- the Ustasa were-- I mean they were the ones that like killed my cousin in Jasenovac, rather than the Nazis.

So that I have a great problem with the Croatians. They really gave away a lot of Jews. And the Serbs-- well, Greek Orthodox, their religion was a little more accepting of Jews. You know, all this is religious based, I'm sure you know. My personal feeling, you know, the Croatians after 50 years got what they needed to get. It's very horrible. It's really not fair what I feel. I keep my feelings to myself.

Do you feel in any way that Yugoslavia is your homeland? Or do you feel very American? What are your thoughts about Yugoslavia, the former Yugoslavia?

The former Yugoslavia. I was born in Split. Dalmatia is my-- Split is my city, OK. That, not the country, is the city. Italy belongs to me emotionally. I grew up there. You know, from 10 to 17 are the formative years. I feel very comfortable, more comfortable than in English in some respect than Italian. I'm very comfortable with Italian. I've been teaching it all these years. I have Italian friends. So that's where my sp--

How do I feel now? I don't feel American. That's one of the problems. I don't think you ever really and truly feel like you're an American. Some people start singing little songs to children. I don't know the children's songs. I just have never, you know-- so it's always-- I tell my grandchildren, the first song they know, it's my Italian song, Batti Le Manine.

But it's so interesting my nine-month-old adores it. When I left I had to tape it, because that's all he does is wait for me. And when he sees me, he goes, Nonna-- he looks at me as the-- and my grandchildren call me Nonna and all that, but--

Which is Italian for grandmother.

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. But Nona was the Spanish, the Latino word. So it's a mixture, you know. But basically, if you had a life like mine, you are not part of any country. And that is the sad part. You don't really feel you belong. And then people don't-- you probably detect the accent. Many people don't too much. You know, they kind of-- she speaks a little weirdly, or whatever. But they don't realize it.

But you're really not-- you're a displaced person for the rest of your life in some respects. And then you have these American children who are so American that I can't even-- yet Sandy has found her way into the European crowd because of her husband who's with the IMF. So Sandy-- but the other, my youngest one that was born in Atlanta, she's a Southern little girl, you know.

Do you feel then feel like sometimes that you're two different people, the young person you were--

Oh, yes. I'm so glad you brought that up. I feel like they were two Tildas. It split, you know. There was one before she came to the States and the one came after. And there are two people, two lives, completely separate, completely. I mean, it's just different-- and I had this experience. I was in Israel this December, past December, and got together with my cousin, who I hadn't seen. She had visited maybe twice in the last 50 years.

She'd come to the States. I was in Israel once. I spent some time. But here it is, she is my cousin whose brother got killed in-- and when we got together, we spoke so-- it was just like we were two different people. Even she was different. It was like we were transported back to Split when she used to come on vacation from Zagreb. And she was my big cousin who used to take me everywhere. We went every place. We went swimming. And it was like we were back to being young kids. And we were speaking the language. Yeah, definitely, two or three-- two definitely, two different people.

Have you gone back to visit--

I have not gone back to Yugoslavia. I was back in Italy a couple of times and went to Milan. And it was kind of sad. Somehow-- I didn't even contact any of-- one of my friend died. But it was sad, because somehow you're a stranger in some place. But this happens here too. I think if you move away and go back, you're a stranger in the old city.

And so we went to Florence, which I had not been to. Went to Rome, which I had visited. That was fine. Milan was difficult because I kind of saw myself.

Did you go back to Bari.

Never been back to Bari. That's where I wanted to go back. That's where I wanted to go back. Everybody advised me against it. It was very high crime. But I think next time I'm going anyway.

But you said you didn't go back to Yugoslavia.

No, I've never been back. My parents have--

Do you have any desire to?

Split. I don't want to say Yugoslavia. I want to go back to split. My parents went back a couple of years before they died, probably 1978 or something. And they found it extremely painful. So it was very difficult.

But I'd like to go back to see the sea. Just to see the sea and see the city. But see the sea and just kind of go up in the mountain-- not the mountain. Back to where the cemetery is. But just go up there. I think I'd like to put kind of-- it's probably going to be much smaller or not as beautiful and all that.

Does water bring back your childhood to you, when you're near a body of water?

Yeah, you picked that up very well. Yeah, I'm a different person, my husband always says, if I'm near the ocean. Not water. Body of water. Not a river and stuff. Though last night we went, yesterday afternoon, close by a river. But the river was moving fast. So it had this--

Motion--

Motion of the-- who do you say? But actually--

The current?

Waves, waves, the ocean waves, the waves that make noise. But I am a different person, because that's where-- if I'm near the ocean and I hear the waves and the smell of the sea, I am immediately happy. I guess that brings me back to Split when I was a little girl and the beach was my oyster actually. I just loved to swim. I still do. Yeah, the ocean has a great deal.

What are your thoughts about Germans and Germany?

It's very interesting. I have a very hard time-- I teach English at Berlitz and Lingua and all the language schools. And German students always request me, businessmen, executives. I have a very hard time teaching them. But still my personality being so grammatically correct and this and that appeals to them. I have a hard time.

So I have lately requested, please, no more Germans students. I have a hard time. I still have a hard time. And they must sense it too, because I've had some women students and they try to shower me with gifts. And I just-- I don't understand-- maybe--

These are Germans students, German adult students.

Who are learning English.

Yes.

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And so I don't-- but I think something about my personality when I teach appeals to them. Or maybe the guilt, I don't know, appeals to them because of the structured-- when I teach I'm very-- I don't know. But it's funny.

As a matter of fact, three weeks ago, I said, who is it? From Ziemanns. I said, German. I said, skip me, give me somebody else, give me somebody from South America, you know, because we work intensely with students for two or three weeks. And then they go on.

Is this a one on one type--

One on one. So you develop a very-- you see what's happening here within a few hours. So if you work this many hours on a daily basis with somebody, you know, I'd just rather not.

Have you ever visited Germany?

No. But-- and I was very angry-- when we decided to go to Israel on a bat mitzvah trip for our granddaughter, the rabbi booked through Germany, through Frankfurt. And we flew Lufthansa. One of the stewardess picked up my grandson. And I became-- but she was really-- she picked on the rabbi, because there were no kosher meals. They forgot to bring kosher meals. And we were flying a long trip from Frankfurt to-- they had vegetarian. And then they-- it became a very big-- it was new year's day we were flying. Make a big-- and then she picked on my grandson that he was playing a game.

And this was-- oh, I became violent. I have never become-- I really became violent. And the rabbi's daughter became violent. I think both of us get this reaction. And the poor rabbi said please, we got to fly with these people. We are on the plane-- so I've never been to Germany and don't want to. I'm sorry, but this is really-- violence.

You were a young child during wartime years. Do you feel that that was an advantage, because you really weren't aware of what could possibly have happened to you? In other words, that your parents were adults and knew more of the danger. A child doesn't know--

I was not aware of the danger. I was aware that there was something to fear. But I was not aware of what I was fearing, you know. It was communicated to me, the danger was communicated to me, maybe not verbally. But I still felt-- I couldn't-- the horrors that I saw afterwards, you know, like the Holocaust Museum, something here, I did not--

You know being in the Holocaust museum, I much more identified with the children exhibit, because that was my--

That's who you were.

That's who I was, exactly. I'm much more hiding and being in these small places with a lot of people. You know, because in our small apartment, everybody descended on us. The dark-- you know, no lights, the whole thing. So it's--

When your children were growing up, did you talk openly about what happened to you during the war time?

No, I did not. It wasn't popular then. I hate to say this. People say people avoided talking. I don't think we avoided talking. I really think since the Holocaust Museum was built, I think-- I'm sorry-- now, I realize that basically it wasn't popular.

And maybe I'm rationalizing. I did talk. I would get depressed. It's funny, I don't anymore. I would get depressed. And then all these things-- why did I survive and the others didn't? And was it really worthwhile? It was one of these-- oh, God, the driving machine. I'm sorry, there was somebody on the telci.

That's OK.

OK. So did I really-- please ask me the question. I lost it. I don't like to talk about it.

I was asking you whether you talked with your children about what you had gone through.

I mentioned occasionally. And-- oh, please, please, please, please, don't let me forget to mention one person. It's funny, there's a saying in Spanish, [SPANISH], which means if you forget anything, you forget the gold. If you have a piece of jewelry-- I in Split had of a young boyfriend. We were born a few months apart. And we lived close by. As you know, I left when I was 10.

But this was like this blond child was absolutely beautiful. And we were always kind of pitched together. When they saw us, everybody said, oh, Tilda, where is Mosco? Oh, Mosco, where is Tilda? His last name was the same as mine, Finzi. Finzi was a very popular name.

And he was like somebody that you think as a child who you are going to end up with, this was somebody that it was kind of predestined. Unfortunately, he was killed in concentration camp. And occasionally-- occasionally, when I think I used to get depressed-- he was born 1933, same year. He was taken to camp in March. This was the dates here, on March 11, 1944, to Jasenovac. And he never survived, never came back.

I had heard that he had written postcards asking to send them food and the Jewish people that he knew as a child. But I don't know. And occasionally, years ago when I used to get depressed, I used to cry for him. And this was-- again, I had forgotten him. I forgot to talk about him. No, I did. That's it. But I almost-- and in my book, there's a dot beside his name. And what was the question? I'd forgotten. Sorry.

We were just talking about what you had talked about. In this book, you said there was a notice--

Here's a notice with the Italian-- but it's interesting, this precedes-- no, this-- first, notice the Italian put up, I don't know, at the beach.

Can you translate it?

Yes. [SPEAKING ITALIAN], which means, attention, entrance to Jews is prohibited.

This is to the beach.

To the beach. It was many places, but it was--

When you would see that, would you obey it?

Oh, definitely, otherwise if they caught you, my God. No, you obeyed everything.

So you are not rebellious in the sense of--

Of going to this beach? Oh, no. I went to separate-- this was a fancy beach that-- I've always gotten to fancy-- with this little cots and everything. We went to a beach that was just jump from the stones and go swimming. The sea was still the same. And I had my friends. But, you know, Jewish friends that went. This is all a 10-year-old, I can't believe, going to the beach alone and swimming in the ocean, you know, in the sea. It was just--

You were even aware of the danger of not obeying a sign.

Oh, yes, definitely. I mean there was no-- OK, there was no--

OK, now here is a sign. Can you translate?

Yes. And this was probably-- I don't know when the sign was posted. Yeah, it was in 1943. But what it says-- I would assume is sometimes after September 20, I would assume it to have been posted. And here, I'm going to-- to the population of Split.

[NON-ENGLISH]

Oh, maybe you don't want a civica. All Jews without regard to their religion-- Jews without regard to their religion-- or citizenship must report by September 28 the latest at 12 noon at the command, at the German command, in front of the Hotel Ambassador. Who doesn't report will be hung. With all citizens of Split who hide Jews-- who hide converted Jews or non-converted Jew, all who do not report that they see Jews will be treated just as the Jews are. And the owners of houses, which houses mean buildings in this case, must remove all Jewish print material and all communist print material, all things pertaining to Judaism from their premises immediately. And it's commandant mestre, which is the commander of the town.

And this was a sign that was posted.

I don't know. I would assume all over the city, all over the city, because they had to report to me.

And you had left already for the mountains.

We had left September 11. Remember, my mother's 11th wedding anniversary, and I was 10 years old. And my mother had gone back. So my mother was there, remember, for a few hours. But she'd gone back, I think, around September 18 or 17. I don't know when.

This is September 28--

28th already. But wait a minute, they must report no later than, so this must have been posted a few days before. I don't know how many. And this is pictures which will eventually give to the museum.

Why is it that some people like you and your family left for the mountains and others did not?

That's an excellent question too, because people who did not feel strong enough, like my aunt who was a little bit spoiled on that, my soul, her soul, forgive me, couldn't handle hard walking, was afraid of her little son. She was afraid of what is going to be in the mountains, they stay. Some people couldn't leave their homes. They felt that their homes were so important to them. Some people were naive and thought nothing would happen. So they were different people for different reasons that didn't. Some people were old that I understood-- but some old people left too and walked.

I don't know, my father had this we had to leave. it was like you couldn't-- I mean, there was not a-- and maybe that's why when you, say how did you feel, there was no question. It was just we were leaving. I mean it was a definite thing.

He even had some money in my step grandmother's house, apartment, in another part of the city, not far. He did not want to go get-- of course, that's what saved her, because she was hidden. Somebody hid her. And she used all that money to survive. And she survive the war. They picked her up towards the end and put her in jail. And she was a tough cookie, that step-- I called her my nonna. She was a tough cookie, spit on them. I mean treated them like-- and she survived the war and ended up in Israel, and I saw her in Israel many years ago.

What are your thoughts about Israel?

In what sense?

What it means to you? What does Israel mean to you?

It means a great deal. It's a safe place. And I think maybe I ask that question, maybe there's some guilt for not having gone there, for having come to the States. It wasn't my-- I did not-- 17, I was not grown up enough when I came. I think there's some guilt for having come to the-- taking the easy way out, the soft life. It wasn't soft, but relatively soft.

How I feel about Israel now? I don't know. You know, I think my opinion now is I was just there. And it seems like there's so much materialism. But that's a completely, you know, era, but I feel it's where I should have been, where I probably would have felt more comfortable. Why I don't know.

I'm perfectly comfortable. I fit in. I feel at times I don't fit in. But I fit in. I know I do, you know.

But somehow I think maybe more family, there is more family there. There was more family. Go ahead, you had another question.

Is there any message you'd want to give to your grandchildren about, lessons that you have because of what you went through.

That I have to think about. Oh, God. I'm sorry. I'm having a hard time with that one.

Basically, it's the same, being dependent. Prepare yourself for life well. Not study hard, prepare yourself. Be prepared.

I always insisted that my daughters, go to school, get a college, go to grad school, go to this, go to that. Be independent. Why independence? I guess independence. Just be independent. Be able to think for yourself. The big thing is have an open mind and think for yourself. Don't allow people to influence your thinking. They always say, I fight for everything. I'm a big-- sometimes I stick my head down, but it's painful for me. It's painful for the others, but then they come around.

So this is the big message is basically think for yourself. And form your own opinions. And be true to yourself.

Is there anything you'd want to add before we finish?

I don't think so. I don't know. No, I don't think so. I love my family. I love my children and my grandchildren. And I'm very proud of all of them. I'm sorry.

Well, thank you very much for doing the interview.

Oh, please, thank you. You were wonderful.

This concludes the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Volunteer Collection Interview with Tilda Finzi Cohen.