

**Tilda Fenzi**

**Tape 1, Side A**

**April 14, 1998**

**RG-50.106\*0096.01.03**

**Abstract**

Tilda Fenzi was born July 11, 1933 in Split, Yugoslavia to Hannah Montevo (?) and Morris Fenzi, Sephardic Jews. She was an only child. There was no kosher food in Split but the family was active in the sole synagogue in the Old Town. She spoke Serbo-Croatian and learned Ladino from hearing her parents' conversation which later helped her to easily acquire Italian. Her favorite holiday was Simchat Torah and her greatest love was the nearby beach. She was close to her parents who sang a song to her which she records in this interview and often sings to her grandchildren. . Her father joined the Army when Yugoslavia entered the War on March 25, 1941. He came home a month later when Yugoslavia capitulated and the German Army ran through Yugoslavia. After the Germans, came the Italians who occupied her city on April 6, 1941. There were many prohibitions including Jewish children were forbidden to attend public schools but they could open their own private schools. Tilda tells how she took food to her uncle in prison as it was considered safer for her than her parents as Italians did not hurt children. Some relatives came to live with them when they escaped from the Fascists and others were killed while fighting with the Partisans. At the end of this part, the family escapes the Germans who are expected shortly. With hundreds of other people, they walk two days up the mountains to be with the Partisans.

Tape 2 begins when Tilda and her family try to escape from the Germans coming to Split by walking up the mountains to the Partisans. She was fearful when her father left for training with the Partisans but at 43 was thought to be too old and he returned to them. Soon Tito tried to save the Jews from the Germans by having them transferred to Islands on the Dalmatian Coast. Her father walked through the mountains with the men to the Coast and Tilda and her mother go by truck but have to walk the last few miles. They take a motorboat to an Island and are sheltered in a school. After about a month the American allies sent them a ship which they took to Bari, Italy. There her father borrowed money so they could live in a private home rather than the refugee camp and he supported the family by working the Black Market. Tilda experienced bombing and poison gas. She had minimal schooling in Bari and could not keep up with the Jewish Day School when they moved to Milan in '48. When she was 17, the family took a ship to the US where she was in charge as she had learned some English from a tutor. She graduated from high school and after some time, her father secured a position as a mailroom clerk. Tilda attended Hunter College on scholarship and then went to Pittsburgh for graduate school where she met her husband. They lived in Pittsburgh, Denver and Atlanta and have 3 daughters. Loud noises, certain food such as butter and certain cultural actions bring back War memories.

The final tape is mostly about Tilda's reactions from the effect of living through the Holocaust. She does not like working with immigrants as they bring back her own memories. The experience did not change her positive belief in Judaism. She does not feel like she belongs to any country but feels closest to Italy where she spent from age 10 to age 17. She returned to Italy but it made her feel sad and she did not try to contact her friends there. She does not care to return to Yugoslavia but she has good memories of the ocean at Split. She has visited Israel twice and wonders if she might have felt more comfortable living there. She feels uncomfortable teaching German students and does not care to visit Germany.

She recalls a sign in Split that prohibited Jews from using a nice beach and tells of the notice when all the Jews had to report to the Commander for deportation. Finally, Tilda says that the most important thing is to be independent with one's own opinions..

### Summary

- 00:00 Tilda Fenzi was named Mazel Tov Fenzi at birth after her paternal grandmother who died when her father was 11 years old. She never used, "Mazel Tov" at home but was called Tilda. Since Mazel Tov is her legal name, she was required to use it upon entering first grade as it is on her Yugoslavian birth certificate. Tilda was born July 11, 1933 in Split, Yugoslavia to Hannah Montevo (?) and Morris Fenzi, both having been born in Sarajevo. Her father moved from Sarajevo to the Dalmatian Coast when he was five and then to Split. Tilda has a grandfather from Dubrovnik. Tilda was an only child. Her father owned a dry goods store in Split, a city on the Adriatic coast in Dalmatia. Split is a pretty city, the sea is beautiful and the scenery is wonderful. There were about 100 Jewish families. They were active with a club and an old synagogue where on Fridays they took their chickens to be killed. There was no kosher food. They ate the chicken on Saturday and Holidays. They had no beef. Her father was active in Judaism. He attended Friday night services but not on Saturday as had to open his dry goods store. He observed the holidays..
- 05:00 Kashrus (keeping kosher) was hit and miss as there was no kosher butcher. Her father was knowledgeable as he conducted services all over, even New York where he was President of the Yugoslavian Jewish organization. The family lived on Politika Chaska Down (?) Street at Number 11. There was no Jewish community by the time her parents came to Split. They lived in an apartment house with six apartments, two on each floor. There were no other Jews in the building but some lived next door, across the street and a block away. It was a middle-class neighborhood. The Jews were scattered, perhaps a family in every 5<sup>th</sup> building. She had a step grandmother and an aunt in Split. The aunt's name was also Tilda after the grandmother. Her father's brother would come to their home for Shabbat dinner and Holidays. Before the War, she had cousins living elsewhere including Zagreb and Sarajevo but later they escaped to Split. She spoke Serbo-Croatian and her parents spoke Ladino so she would not understand. They were Sephardic Jews. Today Pesach is her favorite holiday. As a child Chamashashee (?) (Simchat Torah) was her favorite. They would walk around the synagogue with a paper bag of dried fruit and nuts in the Fall. Then they had a party in the synagogue. It was the only synagogue in town. You could not see the synagogue from the street as you reached it by walking through a narrow passageway of stores. The women sat upstairs.
- 10:00 There was a garden where the Chamashee (?) march took place and where they built the Succah. She did not think the synagogue was built out-of-the-way to be hidden. It was located in the Old Town where the streets were narrow though the churches had an open area. Tilda had non-Jewish friends including the young people in her building. She had a Jewish friend, a boy. Before '41, in the building, she was friendly with Maritza (?) who was her age. After '41 things changed. Tilda enjoyed being taken to an amusement park with rides in Sarajevo. Her greatest hobby was the beach. She learned to swim before she learned to read. She loved

jumping and diving into the water. Tilda still swims. As she was an only child, her parents were very protective of her. They were involved in what she ate and were very caring. Both parents were nice but her father was extremely close to her. Her parents would sing to her and now she sings to her grandchildren. She has a 9 month old grandchild. Tilda sings.....and cries a bit. She translates the song, "A little bird came and flew to us carrying a letter in its beak.

- 15:00 The letter says regards from her mother." Tilda started public school at age seven though earlier she attended the German Nursery School. She recalls pictures of her at the beach as she spent a lot of time there. Their maid brought them lunch at the beach. There were many cabanas where they changed their clothes. The beach was crowded with people. They had a maid but no car. Her father would meet them at the beach for lunch. The family lived in the newer section of town. It was about a 10 minute walk to the beach. Before the War, her father was very active politically. At 18, he was jailed as a Communist. He was also an active Zionist and pro-Israel as he attended the Congress in Vienna. He did not talk about Communism but talked about Zionism. The family did not remain in Italy as they were worried that Tilda would marry someone who was not Jewish. They did not go to Israel as their relatives warned them of the hard life there so they went to the US. She does not recall mention of Hitler. Her first recollection of Nazi was in early '41. Her father joined the Army when Yugoslavia entered the War on March 25, 1941.
- 20:00 He was gone a month and Yugoslavia capitulated and he came home One day Tilda and her mother were walking back from dinner at a friend and found the entire city full of Germans in trucks and motorcycles entering en masse. Her mother said, "Oh my G-d, I hope we make it home." They wore no indication of being Jewish but her mother was fearful. The Germans drove through the city that evening and were gone the next day. Tilda had been in first grade since September '40. Everyone knew that she was Jewish and celebrated different holidays and not Christmas. Her friend, Maritza, lived in the basement and her family took care of building maintenance. They were helpful to Tilda's family by hiding their winter coats for their return. They also hid partisans. Tilda had heard comments that a doctor had made negative comments about Jews. Tilda needed to have her tonsils removed and her mother told her that this doctor is the best one for the surgery. Tilda refused to use the doctor. He treated immigrants during the Italian occupation. Tilda does not recall being treated badly.
- 25:00 She does not recall hearing about Hitler when she was seven years old. She does not remember her father leaving for the Army but remembers his return as her mother was thrilled that he was not taken prisoner by the Germans. It was a week or so after the Germans marched through her city that her father returned. When the Italians came they were given prohibitions such as not owning a business or attending school. The Italians occupied her city on April 6, 1941. It was a very frightening sight for her to see masses of German soldiers wearing helmets traveling in military trucks. Usually there was no traffic at night as few people owned cars. Tilda's mother said to stay close, keep to the side, don't look up and just get home. Tilda was very obedient as children were in that era. She heard the fear in her mother's voice so she would not rebel. The Italians came two weeks later and reopened the schools with Italian teachers where they were not permitted to speak the Serbo-Croatian language. She knew Spanish but no Italian. Her father knew Italian. Both the teachers and school administration were Italian which was challenging. Tilda spoke Ladino which was Spanish and close to Italian

and she could communicate with her teacher. She was almost eight at the time. She might have spoken Serbo-Croatian. Life seemed normal. Relatives from Sarajevo and Zagreb including her father's brother and her mother's sister came to live with them. They had to fire the maid as it was prohibited for her to work for them. Tilda could not go to school or congregate.

30:00 Tilda knew that relatives were escaping from Germany. After a young cousin was shot and killed, the parents and sister came to Split. Tilda's mother cried and there were no secrets as everyone spoke Ladino. She knew that her mother collected clothes for the Partisans. Tilda did not ask why they spoke Italian at school. All the street signs and everything legal were in Italian. The City was ruled differently. It was a big change. One day she wore her white fur coat and was thrown out of school. Tilda was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade where she did well. She had the same teacher as in first grade. She got home and the whole family was sitting and had nothing to do. There was a strange feeling in the house. Tilda returned to school in the afternoon and the teacher said that was OK but to bring her father. Tilda told the teacher that she did nothing wrong and the teacher agreed with her. She returned to school with her father and the teacher said that she is sorry but Tilda can stay the afternoon but cannot return the next day.

35:00 None of the Jewish children were permitted to attend. When you are eight years old, school is normal life and Tilda was a good student so it was a very meaningful experience for her. Tilda was also a good student in the US but it was very hard. Her father told her not to worry, that they will form a new school near the synagogue and meet in different houses. The family was already planning this. **Tape 1, Side B.** In Fall of '41, one of her uncles, her mother's brother, had sent her the fur coat as a birthday gift. It looked like spun sugar candy. There was no snow in Split but it was cold due to the strong, penetrating wind from the sea. A school was organized a few weeks later. Children from the non-Jewish school asked why they don't return to school but she said that she could not. She played in the garden. Friends asked her to come back as the teacher said "yes." Tilda had a fit so her father brought her to school one afternoon.

40:00 The students were outside at an assembly. Tilda came with her book bag and the teacher said, "no," that she make a mistake and apologized. Tilda went home and cried. She was sad. She was a strong-willed child and her parents did not know how to deal with it. Within a few weeks, the Jewish School started. It was fun. There were two grades together with boys and girls in the same class. The classes were held above a store which they cleaned up, put in lights and put in a bathroom. There were no desks but they sat at a very long and narrow table. One grade sat on one side and another grade sat on the other side. Professors from high school and college who had lost their jobs, were their teachers. They were very good teachers. She attended for 2 years. They had exams in Italian at the end of each year. She got promoted and grades from the Italian government. The "Garden of the Finzi Continis" speaks about similar experiences. It tells how the Italians treated the Jews. Many Sephardim spoke Ladino so were able to speak Italian. Salomon Fenzi, an engineer from Belgrade, Yugoslavia had escaped to Split, was a good Italian teacher. Students from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> grade met with him at different hours. You attended elementary school for 4 years, then middle school and then high school.. Each school was at a different location. Jews could not attend public schools. Some students met in her uncle's apartment. They needed the permission of Italian authorities to organize these schools.

- 45:00 Tilda was not frightened to see Italian soldiers in the street unless they were wearing black shirts as fascists were frightening. There was a curfew so they could not go out at night. One night her mother had a gallbladder attack and they could not go out. An Italian officer rented an apartment below them. They saw him smoking a cigarette on his balcony at 1 AM so her father asked him to go to the police to get them a doctor. He said that he was a physician so he treated her mother and returned later to see how she was feeling. If you associated with Italians it was dangerous as people would think you were pro-Communist. At nine years old, Tilda was allowed to meet friends to go to the beach for swimming. They walked over a bridge where an Italian was standing guard who addressed her in Italian. He made friends with her and showed her pictures of his daughter. She was not afraid of him. She was afraid of the black shirts as they beat Jews coming out of synagogue on Friday night and burnt the sacred books on the Piazza. Older men were beaten in June 1942 but they continued going to synagogue. Chairs from the synagogue were placed on trucks..
- 50:00 The Jews no longer walked in the area where the books were burned. Tilda was afraid of the Fascists as they put some Jews in prison including her uncle. It was a badge of honor to be in prison. The Italians never hurt the children so Tilda was sent with food for the uncle as the prisoners were fed by their families. She spoke Italian and was allowed to see her uncle, Chaim Montijo (?), who later died with the Partisans. When Tilda was younger, she would go out with the maid. Every day she took food to her uncle midday in a holder with little pots on top of one another. The prison guards welcomed her and took the pots and returned them the next day. Sometimes they called her uncle to the window of the cells and she waved to him. Her parents were afraid to go. Her house was full of relatives. They had four or five rooms, all filled with people. There were four or five people in each room and they all shared the available food.
- 55:00 As an only child, Tilda loved a house full of people. It was a lot of work for her mother but the women helped out. They had bread, fish and vegetables. Meat, sugar and butter were scarce. She was not hungry, just hungry for certain foods. Perhaps her father was hungry as he lost weight. They were fearful of the Germans advancing. There were different fronts: Russian and African. The Americans and British were in Sicily so they hoped the Allies would cross the South Adriatic Sea and they would be liberated. They were very hopeful but the Allies never came. They listened to a radio in secret as the radio was forbidden. They collected money and clothes. Joseph Fenzi's daughter, also Tilda Fenzi, died. At 15 or 16, she joined the people who fought against the occupation. She threw petrol on a commander. She was not caught and went to the mountains with the partisans where she died fighting.
- 60:00 Since her father was a known Communist, he kept a low profile. He might have collected food. Her Uncle Beepo (?) was jailed for mentioning that he was a Communist and never mentioned Tilda's father. The uncle was old and put in a hospital where he died. Her father visited non-Jewish friends who owned dry goods stores. He was well thought of. A non-Jewish Italian family in Split had a store to who the father sold retail and wholesale. They sold lingerie and went to Italy on a buying trip including his wife and children who were in their late teens and early 20s. The boat was torpedoed and they all died. The Fascists helped the remaining children to sell the store and asked who could help them. Tilda's father was asked to liquidate the store as they knew their father would have trusted him. Tilda's father worked for the Fascists for six months to sell the merchandise. Though families did not know all the details, they knew the

existence of concentration camps. They did not tell the children the facts in case they were questioned. Instead of talking about the war, Tilda's friends talked nothing serious, just about who they liked and who they passed notes to. The teachers told them nothing. The children were devilish.

65:00 When the Rabbi who served as the Hebrew teacher was late, the children decided to turn the lights out so they would be sent home. They removed the bulbs and the Rabbi sent them home. They had fun. They celebrated the Jewish holidays and said their prayers at home as they no longer attended synagogue. The synagogue was located on the same street as bookstores. Those that attended synagogue were taken to prison and beaten. There were many resistance movements. The curfew began at 5 PM. Some of the Jewish families were fearful of what was going to happen. Around September 1, 1943 Mussolini lost power and Italy capitulated. All Italians and Yugoslavians had identity papers and Tilda's family's papers indicated they were Jewish. They did not wear a Magen David (Jewish star). Tilda did not have her own ID papers. She was able to walk the streets on her own which made her feel independent. When the Italians left, Tilda's father wanted to leave. They got their money and packed and went to the pier for a boat but were not allowed to leave. The Germans were coming so they felt the need to leave.

70:00 Tilda did not question it; She felt it in the air that they must escape. Some people did not feel like leaving. Tilda was 10 and felt older and thought they should leave. Perhaps her experiences made her feel like an adult. Tilda was admired to be mature. Her Uncle Salomon Finzi had a son, Sasha, a year or two younger. The uncle went with the partisans in the mountains but his wife and son did not go and died in a concentration camp. Tilda felt guilty that her cousin died. She knew she had cousins in the mountains. They carried blankets and a few other things with them to the mountains. They left a couple of days after trying to get the boat. After walking a day or two, they put down their blankets to go to sleep. They went with Uncle Beepo (?), Aunt Finzi, and friends who lived nearby but no one her age. They walked with hundreds of people, some were non-Jewish. The son and daughter, who her father helped close their store, walked with them. Tilda only took clothing and blankets with her. She left her dolls and fancy buggy as they only took things for survival. Her mother took their Seder plate, Mezuzah and one spoon from her silver. Tilda was recently asked what she would have taken and replied the same things her mother brought. Tilda said that she still owns the moth eaten blanket from that time.

75:00 Her mother was fine. After two days they got to a small village in the mountains.

**Tilda Fenzi Cohen**

**Tape 2, Side A**

**April 14, 1998**

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**Abstract**

Tape 2 begins when Tilda and her family try to escape from the Germans coming to Split by walking up the mountains to the Partisans. She was fearful when her father left for training with the Partisans but at 43 was thought to be too old and he returned to them. Soon Tito tried to save the Jews from the Germans by having them transferred to Islands on the Dalmatian Coast. Her father walked through the mountains with the men to the Coast and Tilda and her mother go by truck but have to walk the last few miles. They take a motorboat to an Island and are sheltered in a school. After about a month the American allies sent them a ship which they took to Bari, Italy. There her father borrowed money so they could live in a private home rather than the refugee camp and he supported the family by working the Black Market. Tilda experienced bombing and poison gas. She had minimal schooling in Bari and could not keep up with the Jewish Day School when they moved to Milan in '48. When she was 17, the family took a ship to the US where she was in charge as she had learned some English from a tutor. She graduated from high school and after some time, her father secured a position as a mailroom clerk. Tilda attended Hunter College on scholarship and then went to Pittsburgh for graduate school where she met her husband. They lived in Pittsburgh, Denver and Atlanta and have 3 daughters. Loud noises, certain food such as butter and certain cultural actions bring back War memories.

### Summary

- 00:00 This part begins when the family tries to escape from the Germans by leaving Split and walking up the mountains to the Partisans. They used their blankets to sleep in the open. Tilda slept with her parents. She had never slept out before but it was like camping. Her only fear was when her father left to fight with the Partisans. Her uncle Chaim also left for the front. Tilda and her mother stayed behind with the women. She spent her day getting food and playing with the other children, some Jewish and some non-Jewish. Everyone was escaping the Germans. Her group was mostly Jewish. They were in a small town under the command of Hal Firga (?), her father's cousin. He asked her mother if she wanted anything from Split and they drove there and her mother returned with a sweater and a coat. Tilda was alone and afraid that they could have been shot. Her father returned a week later as at 43 was thought too old to fight in the mountains although he had received some military training. Her Uncle Chaim remained with the Partisans and later was killed.
- 05:00 Tilda had no contact with her father while he was away as they did not have a phone nor did they know precisely where he was. Her mother cried during that time as she was fearful of what was going to happen. Tilda felt that she became the parent as she took care of her mother. Her father returned. It was thought that the Germans were coming close so they had to move further. Tito made a decision for Jews. Tilda's father had returned to Yugoslavia in '78, the year before he died, and got a memento from her cousin which she now has. Her parents had helped this cousin with food and clothing. Tito saved the Jews except those who wanted to stay and fight. He transferred them to Islands on the Dalmatian Coast to get them away from the Germans. The men and strong women walked through the mountains and up North to get the boats at night. Women and children went by truck. They said good-bye to her father and carried the valise with their belongings. Her father was walking so could not carry it. The truck

went toward Split and toward the Coast. The Germans were advancing so the people were dropped off and the truck picked up soldiers in Split. Now they could only carry their blankets. They walked in the opposite direction of the truck. She was 10 years old and stayed close to her mother.

- 10:00 Then they saw her father and they were happy. They had been worried that her father would worry about them as they were late. The older women had walked slowly. The women encouraged each other to continue on. Tilda does not recall having any food or of being hungry. They only walked for 3 hours. They met the father at a village on the coast with food and coffee shops. They ate and waited until dark to take a boat to an Island. They got on a motorboat and arrived at an Island at midnight or 2 AM. Tilda was not worried about her father walking with the aunt and uncle as they had some Partisan training. She was worried that he would worry about her and her mother as thought they were arriving by truck which should have been quick. Her mother wanted to walk but her father thought it would be too much for a 10-year-old so they took the truck. They stayed in a school on the Island and slept on their blankets in the school room and ate in the large mess room. They spent Rosh Hashanah there. Her mother prepared something and put it in the bakery oven to bake.
- 15:00 They ate outside of a restaurant. They spent a week on the first island which is now a vacation spot. They were afraid that the Germans would come and the Partisans were protecting them. Her knees hurt which was the result of tonsil surgery she had in a doctor's office as in early '43 Jews were not permitted into the hospital. She had a condition like rheumatic fever from an infection that went into her joints. She was crying with pain so the Partisans got her a room in someone's house where she stayed about 4 to 6 nights. The last Island they were on was Vis which is in the middle of the Adriatic. They were on the Island from September 11<sup>th</sup> to October. Just before Yom Kippur, the American allies sent a ship to Vis from which they boarded to Bari, Italy. Wounded partisans were placed on the ship to get treatment at an ally hospital. Bari is a major port on the Adriatic Coast. The 40 to 50 Jews were placed on the bottom of the boat. They did not see the wounded who were in the hospital part of the ship.
- 20:00 The ship sailed with a Red Cross flag. The Jews could only go on top deck at dark. They were on the ship overnight for just one day. She spent some time with her parents and some time playing with other children. The ship went slow as had some motor problems. Now Tilda's family feels she is pessimistic but as a child she adapted easily. She was thankful to be together with both parents. Many on the ship were without a spouse as families were fragmented. There was no child alone. Some were with just one parent. Some people went to camps or Sarajevo. Others stayed with Tito in the mountains. She was glad they left. The Americans were their saviors. It was the first time she saw a Black person. The American soldiers handed out cans of corn beef and chocolate and also threw some into the boat. The soldiers were American and she did not know English. They were taken to stay in a school as all schools were closed during the War. They were given straw to use on the cots.



- 25:00 They ate Army food. She had few clothes, just a change of underwear. Her mother met an acquaintance from Split who gave her a pajama top which Tilda used as a blouse. They were with many refugees in a strange city. They saw some people they knew from Yugoslavia. They had gotten into the 2<sup>nd</sup> boat and saw people who had gotten into the first one. Some people lent money to her father as he did not want to be placed in a camp. It was a strange place but not dangerous. Her parents had no privacy as they shared a room with her. A friend took all the children to the movies. There were four or five children, all younger than her. In the middle of the movie, a bomb fell which was very noisy and they all went to a shelter. They came out when the "all clear" signal was given and walked on broken glass as the windows had broken. Her parents had waited for her to come home and she, in turn, worried about them. They were fine. This was the end of '43. Later, on December 2, there was poison gas. She was free to do anything in Bari that she wanted to do. There was a refugee camp for those who could not support themselves where they received food, clothing and shelter.
- 30:00 Tilda's father had borrowed money which enabled them to live in the town of Bari though later things got harder. Her father rented a room in a woman's house but the bombs got worse so they went to a small village with a few other families. They rented a house and her father went into Bari every day to sell on the Black Market to support the family. Because of the noise of the bombs, for many years Tilda has been fearful of loud noises and thunder. They ran to shelters when there was bombing. She would stay quiet and internalize her fear so her parents would not worry. Shelters were below the houses. They left Bari as were uncomfortable there. The family felt liberated and did not want to be bombed by the Germans. Tilda occupied herself by playing and helping her mother with the cooking. There were books in one of the houses that they rented. She would read the grammar books and became more fluent in Italian.
- 35:00 Tilda did not learn English at that time. A year later there was a mustard gas explosion. It was in Bari and she was attending house school. The teacher was non-Jewish and had two grades at her home. Tilda's mother paid for these private lessons. Tilda took an exam and got admitted to Middle School. There were so many dead bodies from the gas explosion. She believes health problems were caused by it. It was horrible. They called it the "black rain." It is possible that it caused her father's illness. The dead bodies were placed one on top of the other on trucks for removal. She was stuck in the city at school without transportation. She was 11 or 12 at the time so walked home alone as the trams were not running. At first when she saw the bodies, she thought they were merely wounded. Her family lived 5 miles away from Bari. **Tape 2, Side B.** They spent Passover '44 in Bari before the bombs. One day a British soldier greeted her father. He was in the Palestine contingent and was from the Ukraine. They were able to communicate as both knew Ukrainian, Serbo-Croatian and German. They were unable to locate Uncle Simon Chaim when they were in Israel. The soldier was in the contingent of Palestine Brigade of the British Army performing mapmaking. They were having a Seder in Beteta, a small town near Bari, and wanted her to say the four questions in Hebrew. She was the youngest and could read so was chosen. She went everyday to the Army School where they taught it to her.

- 40:00 She stood up on a chair and recited it for all the Palestinian Army attendees at the Seder. It was a large gathering. She was about 12 years old. Though she knew three languages, she had little schooling. She mostly helped at home with cooking and cleaning. Tilda attended college in the US. For the first Yom Kippur in Bari, her father rented a big hall with a double bed that had a screen around it. They started the fast and did not know where to go. They ate bread and canned corned beef on the bed. She does not know if the corned beef was kosher. Her parents fasted all day but she did not. At the Seder they had matzo, soup and charoses. When she was in the house with the books, she read a lot.
- 45:00 She tried to learn Italian grammar. Tilda took an exam to enter first year high school. At the end of '44, things were normalized. Schools opened though the War was not yet over. She was 12 and behind in school. In 1945 she had an exam as she finished four years of school and entered Middle School. In Spring '45 the War ended and all the refugees returned. Somehow all their relatives came to Bari including her mother's brother and his wife. Her father's brother came on business. She does not recall celebrating when the War was over. People returned from concentration camps so they learned of the atrocities and were sad about those who did not return. Her mother's oldest sister had died in childbirth and left two children who did not return. Perhaps her parents drank and ate and hoped people would return. Some men returned and found their wives with other men which was painful.
- 50:00 They remained in Bari but her father could not find a job. The situation in Yugoslavia was bad so they did not want to return there. Uncle Salomon Montalgo (?) returned to Yugoslavia and told them how difficult it was so they should not come. By then, Tilda spoke Italian fluently, was 13, was good in school and had no desire to return. She wanted to go to Israel as she felt more Jewish than Yugoslavian. They heard of Yugoslavian who were college graduates and had gone to Israel and became maids. They remained in Bari until '48 with her father still working the Black Market dealing with dollars and gold. Tilda was busy with a Jewish youth group and school. She had Jewish friends and, also, non-Jewish friends from school. She remembers they celebrated Purim. In '46 there was a Jewish congregation as there were many Jewish refugees, some from Italy. Then the refugees started to leave and her parents also wanted to leave. She had attended Middle School for three years and they moved to Milan because there were more Jews there, especially Jewish Yugoslavians. Her parents wanted her to attend the Jewish Day School in Milan to learn Hebrew. Tilda was 15 and now had to deal with smart Jewish children. She had pains in her stomach and it was appendicitis. She was behind in school and, for the first time, failed two subjects. It was painful as she had been the best student in class and now she was behind. Tilda could not deal with the dual program so she changed schools and attended public school and did wonderful. In 1950 they went to the US. She was 17 and her father did not want her to marry a non-Jew.
- 55:00 She had been dating a non-Jewish older Medical School student. People were leaving. She had friends in Milan. The Southern Italian school was not good. The Day School was demanding. She came to the US. During the War, her mother had obtained a private teacher to tutor her in English for an hour twice a week. She hated the teacher but continued so was able to speak

some English when they arrived here. Some of her friends went to Venezuela and Argentina but her Italian friends remained. Tilda knew a few people in the US. They came on the ship, the Britannia, a passenger ship. Uncle Hyman met them. She saw the Statue of Liberty but it held no meaning to her.

60:00 She was 17 and loved the voyage as there was swimming and she met a young man. Someone taught Tilda English on the ship. The uncle took them to a school on Hudson Street to stay where men and women slept separately. Since her parents did not speak English, she was in charge of the family. An aunt and uncle who came earlier lived on Broome Street on the lower East Side. Below them lived her boy friend from Yugoslavia and Italy and he took her to the movies. Her father wanted to get them a room. She entered high school though her uncle suggested she work. She completed high school in one and one-half years at age 18 and did well. The family lived in an apartment on West 104<sup>th</sup> Street. She helped get furniture from the Salvation Army. Her father was not working as he did not know English so she worked as a waitress from 3 to 7 or 8 PM. Tilda made \$30 a week. Her mother could not find work. Uncle Chaim helped support them. Tilda was admitted to Hunter College after she graduated from high school with the requirement that she take remedial English.

65:00 Tilda was fifth in her class and the highest in math with a score of 99 on the Regents. She enrolled in the High School of Commerce and graduated from Lincoln High School with a scholarship to college. She was in one group of friends from Europe and another from high school. Her boy friend studied for a degree in engineering and worked at night. She felt there were two different worlds as some did not talk of their War experience. They just looked forward, not backwards. She spoke English, Italian and Serbo-Croatian. Some Americans were interested a little in the War. She made friends. Her parents would speak about life before and after the War but not what happened during the War. They did not suffer as hard as those in concentration camps. They only lost siblings. New York was good. She lived at home while attending college. Her father got a job as a mailroom clerk and became a supervisor as spoke a little English. When her parents were ill, Tilda had to fly home to help. She studied math and languages and met her husband when she attended Graduate School in Pittsburgh. A college friend, Iris Fagan, invited her to a party where Iris' mother introduced her to Iris' brother. She did not care for him so then they introduced her to a nephew. They met in July and by January they were married. He was 27, about 7 or 8 years older than her. It was a mistake as she never finished college. First they lived in Pittsburgh, then to Denver for a year and then they moved to Atlanta where he became Director of Jewish Services. They had two children in Pittsburgh and a third in Atlanta. All three daughters are doing well.

70:00 Tilda feels that she would not be the same person if she had not gone through the War. She is proud that she speaks three or four languages. She is proud that she fits in with people from all over the world. She does not know if she would have been happier if she had not had these experiences but she would have been different. She feels that she lost her childhood. When her children were teenagers, she had open house for all their friends. She lived her childhood through them. It was not good but she loved living vicariously through their lives. Tilda insisted

on having her children do well in school and was very intense about it. It was a mistake that she pushed them so hard. She has cards in fancy books. She adored butter and still dies for it as did not have it during the War and now she can't eat it as she has high cholesterol. Sometimes a word that she hears transports her to another world. When she sees the separation of families but on TV they are reunited, it reminds her of the War. Her husband deals with new Americans and believes she would be wonderful to teach them English. It would bring back pain to her to learn about a new culture. She gave two examples about her parents learning to live in the US. Her mother bought a butter dish but left the butter uncovered as did not know how to use it. Her father peeled a grapefruit like an orange instead of cutting it properly. Actions like these triggers her memories.

75:00

**Tilda Fenzi Cohen**

**Tape 3, Side A**

**April 14, 1998**

**RG-50.106\*0096.03.03**

### **Abstract**

This final tape is mostly about Tilda's reactions from the effect of living through the Holocaust. She does not like working with immigrants as they bring back her own memories. The experience did not change her positive belief in Judaism. She does not feel like she belongs to any country but feels closest to Italy where she spent from age 10 to age 17. She returned to Italy but it made her feel sad and she did not try to contact her friends there. She does not care to return to Yugoslavia but she has good memories of the ocean at Split. She has visited Israel twice and wonders if she might have felt more comfortable living there. She feels uncomfortable teaching German students and does not care to visit Germany. She recalls a sign in Split that prohibited Jews from using a nice beach and tells of the notice when all the Jews had to report to the Commander for deportation. Finally, Tilda says that the most important thing is to be independent with one's own opinions..

### **Summary**

00:00 The interview continues with Tilda explaining that she cannot work with newcomers as it brings back the pain of her Holocaust experience and adjusting to life here. She recalls as a child, she became the parent and she does not want to relive it as once is enough. She always felt very Jewish although never went to synagogue and still seldom goes. Her husband attends regularly. Tilda does not feel that being Jewish brought pain and does not want to be another religion. It was extremely important to her that her children marry Jews and all three did. She conveyed the importance of this to her children by observing holidays, sending them to Hebrew School and demonstrating that Israel is important by having Israeli relatives visit. Her parents were active in Jewish groups. Her father was President of the Yugoslavian Jewish Organization of the US but was mostly centered in NY. The organization is now disbanded. There are groves

planted in his honor in Israel. Judaism is part of her life. She does not know if they are part of the famous Italian Finzi family, just part of the Yugoslavian Finzi family. Her views of Yugoslavia are unpopular as she had a hard time with the Croats. People had her translate a Croatian letter which said the Nazis did not do horrible things but it was the Serbs who did. Cuna (?) is the same name that the Schuss (?) regime used. Their flag is the same. They were worse than the Nazis as knew who were Jews.

- 05:00 The Schuss (?) came before the Italians to request they put up their flag for the Nazis but Tilda's family did not own such a flag. The Schuss (?), not the Nazis, killed her cousin so the problem was with the Croats who gave up many Jews. The Serb religion accepted Jews more. After 50 years the Croats got what they deserved. Tilda was born in Split, Dalmatia. That is her city. Italy is her country as she was brought up there from 10 years old to 17 years old. She is comfortable there with the Italians. She teaches Italian and has Italian friends. Tilda does not feel American. She sings Italian songs to her grandchildren, not American songs. Her grandchildren call her, "Nona" which is grandma in Ladino. She is not part of any country as she does not feel that she belongs anywhere. People don't recognize her accent. She feels like a Displaced Person for her entire life. Her daughter, Sandy, feels she is part of the US because of her life but Tilda's younger daughter is Southern. Tilda feels like two Tildas. One was before she came to the US and there is the new one; two completely separate lives. She visited Israel in December and saw her cousin who she has only seen twice in 50 years. This is the cousin whose brother was killed. They got together but they are two different people. When she lived in Split, this was the older cousin visiting from Zagreb who took her swimming and spoke the same language.
- 10:00 Tilda visited Italy twice and found Milan a sad place so did not contact her friends. She felt like a stranger there. She visited Florence and Rome for the first time. In Milan she saw herself and it was difficult. She never returned to Bari. People tell her it has a high crime rate. Tilda does not want to return to Yugoslavia but maybe visit Split. Her parents returned in the 70s and found it painful. Maybe she would like to see the sea and go to the cemetery in Split. She is a different person when she is near the ocean. Yesterday she saw a river moving fast and had waves like the ocean. When she sees waves and smells the sea, she is happy as she remembers Split where the beach was her oyster. Tilda loved to swim and she still loves to swim. She teaches English at Berlitz and other language schools. The German students request her but she has difficulty with them so requests students from other countries. The German students like her precise grammar.
- 15:00 The German students shower her with gifts so maybe her personality appeals to them. She prefers students from South America. She works intensely with one-on-one for two or three weeks. It is so many hours on a daily basis which she does not care for. Tilda has never visited Germany. She went on a Bat Mitzvah trip directed by a Rabbi to Israel. They flew Lufthansa and were not given kosher meals. They stopped in Frankfurt. She picked on her grandson that he was playing a game and he and the Rabbi's daughter became violent. She did not want to go to Germany. As a child she was not aware of danger. She knew that there was something to fear

but not exactly what it was. The horror she saw later at the Holocaust Museum. There she identifies with the Children's exhibit which explains her hiding, being in small places with many people and being in the dark. When she was growing up it was not popular to talk about the Holocaust. Since the Holocaust Museum was built things changed. She would get depressed but did not talk. She wondered why she survived but others did not and wonders if it was worthwhile.

20:00 Tilda mentioned the Holocaust occasionally to her children. There is a Spanish saying, "If you forget anything, you forget the gold." She once had a blond boyfriend who was very beautiful. They were always together so if someone saw Mosca (?) (her friend) they would ask, "Where is Tilda?" and if someone saw Tilda, they would ask, "Where is Mosca? (?). His last name was Finzi, the same as hers. They seemed predestined for one another but he was killed in a concentration camp. He was also born in 1933, like her. He was taken to Camp Vosvovich (?) on March 11, 1944 and did not survive. He wrote postcards to people he knew and asked for food. Years ago she would think of him but recently no longer talks about him. She put his name in her memoir. The Italians put up a sign on her beach, "Attention, entrance is prohibited to Jews." She obeyed so she would not get caught. It was a fancy beach with huts. At age ten, Tilda went to a beach alone with friends and they jumped from stones into the water.

25:00 After 9/20/43, a sign was posted, "To the population of Split, all Jews without regard to their religion or citizenship must report by September 28<sup>th</sup> at noon to the German command in front of the Hotel Ambassador. Those who do not report will be hung. All citizens of Split who hide Jews whether they are converted or not or who do not report that they see Jews, will be treated the same as Jews. Owners of buildings must remove all Jewish print material, Communist print material and all things related to Judaism immediately; signed by the Commander of the town." Tilda's family left September 11<sup>th</sup> to the Mountains on her parent's 11<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Her mother returned around September 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup>, around the time they posted the notice. Tilda has pictures that she will give to the Holocaust Museum. People who did not feel strong, like her aunt who was spoiled, could not handle the walking and her aunt was afraid for her son. Some were afraid of the mountains, could not leave their home, naïve or old so did not go. Some elderly walked up the mountain. Her father insisted that they must leave with no questions. He left money with the step grandparent and did not take the time to get it but the money helped her survive the War. Near the end of the War, she was put in jail. She was tough and spit on her jailers. She ended up in Israel. Israel means a great deal to Tilda as it is a safe place. She feels some guilt on coming to the US rather than to Israel. At 17 she was not grown up enough to go there alone. Tilda feels that she took the soft life, the easy way out. She was in Israel recently and there is materialism. She feels that she would have felt more comfortable living in Israel.

30:00 Actually, she fits in though she feels that she does not. Tilda has more family here. She had a hard time to decide what lessons to give to her grandchildren. Finally, she said to be independent and prepare yourself for life. She always insisted that her children go to school and graduate school but that is not as important as thinking for oneself. You should have an open

mind and do not allow people to think for you. Sometimes she sticks her head out but others come around. You should form your own opinions and be true to yourself. Tilda loves her family and her children and is proud of all of them.

32:00