

Marcelo Cohen (nee Kohen)

Interviewed on November 10, 2010

Interviewer: Ilana Soloveichik

Marcelo Cohen was born in Zagreb, Yugoslavia on May 28, 1937. Family was originally from Monastiff(?)(Macedonia) Parents were Khaym and Victoria Kohen. Father went to school for only two years but he was smart and managed to save his family. He became one of the richest people in Yugoslavia before the war. He died in Miami at an advanced age. Mother is still alive and independent at the age of 99 in Miami.

Marcelo's memories as a young child: 1) a pair of white little booties he received at age 2; 2) his mother, with a pistol pointed at her head by a German officer, while she was being interrogated about the whereabouts of her husband. (The event happened when the Germans entered Zagreb and were looking for him-who was one of the leaders of the Jewish community. Having been informed beforehand, father managed to escape, wearing his pajamas and riding in a taxi for 3 days ;) 3) after they had moved to Monasteer (?) to be with friends in 1941, eating fresh tomatoes from their garden.

The family was in Monasteer for a few months, until father-who had bought passports from an Albanese family, seeing what was about to happen, and having befriended the local chief of police- was told that the next day all the Jews will be deported. Despite the warnings to the Jewish community, there were only 12-15 who decided to flee in less than 24 hours. Marcelo's family was the last to cross the bridge before the Nazis blocked it. The Jews who remained, about 35,000, were exterminated. Partisans helped Marcelo's family move through the fields, despite Germans' dogs pursuing them. After a night in an abandoned church they moved on the direction of Albania, after crossing a lake by boat. Rumors had reached the Nazis that a group of Jews had left Monasteer. The Nazis surrounded the hills around the lake with anti-aircraft batteries, while searchlights swept the lake. Luckily, they never zeroed in over the boats of the escapees. Having arrived to Albania's shores they encountered Italian policemen who had been informed of the escape and a couple of Nazi soldiers. Manuel, his father and mother passed the interrogation easily, as they had the fake passports; his uncles and families, with incomplete documentation, were confined to a village in Albania, where they spent the war years. The Jews who did not have any documentation at all were shot by Nazi soldiers on the spot. The fake name of Khaym Kohen was Constantino Pako (?) They spent some time there with Dena Pardo. The family boarded a ship in the Albanian port of Duraso (?), and arrived in Bari, Italy. (The Nazis always looked for them, but under the name Kohen.)

The family lived in Milano, Bologna, Roma, although the father wanted to reach Switzerland (which ended up being impossible.) Father played poker, nightly, with SS and Gestapo's agents, and knew

what was going on. (Father spoke German well.) Father would rehearse Marcelo about his presumed ancestors because there were many Nazis in the hotel where they lived in Rome.

The father- in Roma at the end of the war when it was declared open city and the Allies entered it- was urged by the Nazis to leave. He said, " I am not afraid of them"!

Marcelo never found out what happened to his family in Albania. Mother's family was wiped out. Father found a surviving brother, whom he brought to Chile.

There were close escapes from the Nazis in Bologna, but the family had documents identifying them as members of the Fascist Party.

Family survived the war financially thanks to the mother's jewels and some cash the father had intended to use to buy a building in Yugoslavia but did not at the last minute

When the Allies' flying fortresses papered the sky in Italy the family- who was about to board the train in Bologna- took refuge in a nearby shelter. But, they realized they had forgotten the little suitcase with the cash on the train. Under grave danger, they managed to retrieve it.

No schooling for Marcelo. An Italian young woman taught him a little. After the war, he went to a Hebrew institute there. Marcelo was also an altar boy for the priest in the church. He was in charge of the holy water, dressed in fancy lacey clothes. At one point, Marcelo also stole an Allied jeep by hot-starting it.

Family decided to go to Chile. Mother had family in Chile. Father would have preferred to go to the US, to where they could get a visa. Father encouraged Marcelo to study Engineering after which Marcelo started a construction business. He lived there until the age 32, married, had 3 children. During the Allende crisis, the family left Chile and moved to Miami.

Children don't know much about father's past. A cousin wrote the story of Marcelo's mother story, but his own children do not have an interest in it. He himself forgot the horrible scenes. Children grew up in the US. Father was not religious; mother tried.

There was no Judaism in his life in Italy. No one knew their Jewish identities. Their friends were Italian and Germans. After liberation, when they came forward as Jews, people did not believe them.

Meeting the family who survived in Albania through people who knew them. Father brought them to Chile. Because of the war, out of his 3 brothers, no one married and Marcelo was the only child to continue the name.

Parents spoke little about the war during their life after the war. Father never wanted to go back to Yugoslavia to claim his property.

The parents were the only ones to suffer emotionally during the war. Father did not trust anyone. Marcelo claims that they did not know the extent of the Jewish tragedy. They knew that the Jews were being assembled, but in Italy they knew nothing concrete.

Marcelo forgives the Germans because they were moved by group hysteria. He doesn't feel it was in their nature. "We are all brothers. We have to let each other live in liberty", he says. He feels he is a citizen of the world.

He physically fought anti-Semites after the war. He feels that the Jews went like sheep to the slaughter.

Marcelo feels that, because of the war, he did not have a youth.