The Story of Two Sisters

by Anita Sheldon

Grandparents

Our paternal grandparents, Abram Schuldenfrei and Peller Pessel, born in mid 19th century, lived in Biecz, Poland where they had a dairy store. They had seven children, four girls and three boys, our father, Isaac (Izzy), the first born. Our father fought in World War I on the Austrian side and was taken prisoner in Italy. At the end of the war, when he returned home, he found that life was not easy there and, since he was the oldest and there was not enough food, his mother decreed that he would eat last and, he told us, there was not much left after his sisters and brothers ate. He decided that, since he had liked Italy during his stay there and he was well treated, he would seek a better life and, perhaps, find his fortune there: he did not find his fortune in Italy, but, through one of my uncles, he found my mother, Elena Lager.

We had a chance to meet my paternal grandparents only once, in 1937 (I was four years old and my sister, Judy, 2 1/2) when my father took my mother, my sister Judy and me to Poland to meet his family.

On the way back home to Fiume I remember that we stopped in Vienna to visit our maternal grandfather's sister; the only thing I remember about her is that, as all youngster were required to do when greeting an elderly person, we had to kiss her hand. I remember that I reported to my mother that her hands smelled "old", not realizing then that in those days only home remedies were used to soften hands, probably a mixture of oil, honey and lemon. Strange how I never forgot that experience, brought back to mind just recently when cousin Franco sent us a family picture, showing our maternal grandparents with their grown up children (my aunts and uncles) as well as the great aunt whose name we do not remember, but whom cousin Caty remembered that everyone referred to as the "Wiener Tante"

Unfortunately our father's family, with the exception of Aunt Regina, Uncle Harry and Uncle Jacob, perished at the hand of the Nazis when Hitler invaded Poland. Uncle Harry and Aunt Regina came to Italy where they remained through the war. Uncle Jacob was able to reach Palestine. Aunt Regina and Uncle Harry were interned by the fascists (their story has been written about by two Italian historians who researched what occurred in certain Italian localities during that period). Uncle Harry eventually reached Palestine after spending time in the Cyprus camp; Aunt Regina stayed with my father in Italy for a while after the war and then joined her brothers in Israel in 1949. Their story is told, in Italian, in two books.

Our maternal grandparents, Marcus Lager and Sara Rosa Eisig were also born in the mid 19th century, he in Austria, she in Poland. Our maternal grandfather was a baker who won the bid to bake bread for the workers who, toward the end of the 19th century, were building a railroad from Northern Europe down to the Balkans.

All their nine children were Emanuele, Martino, Ermanno, Giuseppe, Bertha, Dora, Anna, Elena (my mother) the next to the last, born in 1900 and Isacco, the youngest, who died a young man following a botched surgery in Hungary. All the children were born along the railroad route, some in Romania some in Hungary, hard to know where since the borders in those days were always changing. Also there is no certainty about the various dates of birth (my aunts always argued about it). Since each birth could be recorded only when grandparents reached a town with public offices where it seems that grandfather, not remembering the exact dates of birth, would only be able to say something like, "around Passover a son was born" or "around Yom

Kippur a daughter was born" and so forth, no dates. This is the reason why the sisters always argued about it, one always wanting to be younger than the other.

FIUME

When the job was finished and the family was coming back north, in the early 1900s, before WW I, they stopped in Fiume, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My grandfather liked the city and decided to remain there with his family. Fiume, now Rijeka, is in fact a beautiful city, on the Quarnaro Gulf, built from the Adriatic sea up into the hills so that you have the mountains, Monte Maggiore, in back.

Grandfather bought a bakery and set up shop, from where the older boys delivered bread early in the morning before going to school. Everybody in the family spoke Yiddish, Hungarian and then Italian, except my Grandfather who only spoke Yiddish; my mother spoke Croatian as well.

Fiume became part of Italy in 1924 and, while some of my family remained there, some moved to Trieste and Milan.

From what I understood from my relatives, especially my oldest, late beautiful cousin, Ella, who moved to the United States in 1929 to join her mother, Aunt Bertha, in New York, life in Fiume was very pleasant. There were a lot of festivities and balls after D'Annunzio took Fiume for Italy and some of the young family members participated in all the festivities.

Fiume and its surrounding small villages facing the Quarnaro Gulf, along the Adriatic sea, like Abbazia, Ica, Volosca, Laurana, Medea, and Moschiena, are beautiful small hamlets where the family enjoyed summer excursion to the beaches. One summer, in 1937, Aunt Matilde, Uncle Martino's wife, rented a small villa across the street from the beach in Medea and I remember having a wonderfull time there. I was 4 years old and enjoyed playing with my older teenaged cousins, Caty, Magda, Andi, and Bandi; Bandi taught me to swim and allowed me to believe that I was rowing the wooden boat he enjoyed taking out. I visited Medea during my last two visits to Italy and the beach is still beautiful. The villa Aunt Tilde rented is still standing there, only now it serves as the Medea Tourist Office. I could never forget those places.

In Fiume there was a small, but active Jewish community with a beautiful Synagogue (which the Nazis eventually burned down) and a small orthodox Schul when my grandparents worshipped. Across the yard from the Orthodox Schul, was the place where chickens were killed according to Kosher laws.

1933

I was born in Fiume, Italy (now Rijeka, Croatia) on November 26, 1933, the year Hitler came to power and when Mussolini had already been in power in Italy for some years. My sister, Judy, was born on June 19, 1935.

My story is also my sister's story since, until her untimely death in 1999, we had lived together all our life.

It was a most beautiful loving relationship which some might have considered unusual, especially after we moved to New York, where siblings hardly ever live together after leaving the parents' home.

But let us go back to the early 1930s.

In 1938 Mussolini issued the Racial Laws against the Jews. Because of these laws, Jews became second class citizens: professors lost their position at universities, lawyers could not practice, Jews could not own businesses, students could not enter universities nor could they frequent local schools.

The city where I was born, Fiume, now Rijeka part of Croatia, is located in an area that, over the past centuries was always contested between several countries, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to Italy, to Yugoslavia and now Croatia. But not until after 1938 the situation of the Jews in Italy, but especially in my home town being so close to a border area already controlled by the Nazis (Austria), did things become very difficult for us.

Because young families were not allowed to have Aryan domestic help, and my parents had two stores to run, we were forced to move from our beautiful apartment in Viale Camicie Nere to my grandparents' apartment in Via Pomerio, and live for a while in very cramped quarters. I was expelled from kindergarten – I remember, at the ripe old age of 5, cursing Mussolini every time we walked by the school - as were my older cousins expelled from secondary school. The Jewish community obtained two classrooms, part of a public school in Cosala, far from the center of the city. Starting first grade, I, with all other Jewish children from the city, walked a few kilometers every day to a school where only two teachers were teaching the five elementary classes. We were not allowed to enter through the main entrance, but had to use a secondary entrance. When we needed a reference book none of the children wanted to go to the library; we were afraid of the other children who always looked at us with hostility.

There are a few things I remember about life in Via Pomerio: after Italy entered the war on the side of Germany, "oscuramento" or darkening was required; we all sat at the dining room table with dark blue heavy paper which was cut to the size of the windows and then attached to the glass panels to prevent light from going through at night. Enemy planes were not supposed to see light, and therefore find targets for bombs.

One of the nice memories from Via Pomerio was the daily afternoon visits from cousin Bandi who was trying to teach my mother some English, sensing already that we all would have to escape to the United States; I do remember my mother repeating some English words while I was supposedly napping on the nearby sofa after Bandi convinced me to do so by telling me that I would grow after each nap. Unfortunately mother did not make it to the United States and I did not grow after each nap even though Bandi measured me with a tape measure and lied about it each time

Another nice memory of our life in Via Pomerio was watching my mother preparing cucumbers for pickling: in a very large glass jar she would carefully place the cucumbers, with garlic, salt, water, dill, some stale bread, then cover the mouth of the jar with heavy wax paper, tie cord around it and place the jars on the window sills where the sun would cause fermentation and transform the cucumbers in pickles.

I also remember watching her making strudel, fascinated by the fact that she could stretch the dough so thin with her hands without breaking it. I also remember my grandmother's cooking cholent and before Passover making borscht, which was stored in the pantry in very large porcelain enameled containers, and all the cooking was done on a wood burning stove. I guess I know where my love for food and cooking comes from!

I believe, because I do not remember this well, that our mother visited Hungary in this period of time: I remember that she brought back for us those lovely white dresses with multi-colored embroidery in the traditional Hungarian style (I have pictures of us in those dresses). She also brought back Contessa Maritza, a small lovely doll dressed in the Hungarian traditional costume: blue skirt, red vest, white embroidered blouse, braided hair. We were not allowed to play with Contessa Maritza, but only look at her where she sat in front of the mirror on mother's dressing table. She moved with us and was still there when we left Fiume.

I remember young non Jewish children throwing rocks at us while we were walking to and from school and calling us "cifut" which is a Slavic disparaging word that was used to insult Jews. I remember one day in particular, probably in 1941, because I knew that mother was going to visit father in Ferramonti di Tarsia ,her train leaving around 1 PM and I wanted desperately to see her before she went on the long trip. I was really running because some mean boys were yelling and getting closer to me: I fell, hurt my knee, the boys stopped and, of course, they did not come to help me; mind you, they were not much older than me. But, hurt and crying, I made it home before mother left for the long trip.

After first grade, a couple of times a week, I was going to the Temple for Hebrew classes: I remember Dr. Fleishman very well, especially because he reported to my mother that I was not learning the Ten Commandments. But apparently I was able to learn something because my proudest moment was when, at age 7, the youngest at the Seder table (my sister had just started first grade), I was called to ask the four questions in Hebrew from a beautiful illustrated Haggadah gifted to me by my grandfather. Unfortunately that beautiful book, together with other children classics which I loved, were lost with a lot of precious belongings, including Contessa Maritza, during the war.

In 1940, after Mussolini, allied with Hitler, declared war against the British/United States alliance, foreign born men were considered a danger to the Homeland. My father, who, although he had lived in Italy many years, was not an Italian citizen, was jailed for a while like a common criminal – I remember seeing him in striped prison garb when, in 1940, my mother took me to visit him in prison.

She asked me to cry and ask for my father to come home, she thought that, perhaps, a child's tears would move the officials to release my father, but that did not happen. All the male members of our family who lived in Fiume were eventually interned in Torretta, outside the city limits, in a school which was normally used as a children's summer camp. In the same location were interned also male members of other Jewish families from Fiume.

Toward the end of 1940 my father was transferred by the Fascist's government to a concentration camp in Ferramonti di Tarsia, in Calabria at the southernmost tip of Italy, where he remained until 1941, eventually ending up confined ("libero internato") in Treviso. For our father, as well as for other male members of my family and friends, who were confined in different Italian localities, far away from their families, this meant that they were required to stay within the assigned city limits, had to report to the authorities regularly and were given passes to travel to visit the family in other cities, only seldom.

While 6 older cousins were able to leave their parents and Italy in 1940/1941 and come to the U.S. because Aunt Bertha, mother's oldest sister, who had moved to New York in the early twenties procured affidavits for them and somehow, with great difficulty they were able to get visas, my sister and I were too little to leave our mother. (Fate would have it that of those cousins two males, Bandi and Andi, enlisted in the U.S. Army, fought with the 10th Mountain Division in Italy where one of them, Andi Goldstein, lost his life in 1945 in the Battle of Riva Ridge, in the Apennines, just months before the German surrender).

In late 1940 we moved with grandparents to a larger apartment in a beautiful building, in via Mario Asso No. 4, near the main railroad station. So life continued for us in Fiume where my mother had to mind two stores by herself while worrying about my father, who had already lost most of his family to the Nazis in Poland, and about her own parents who were, at age 82, too old to even consider moving to a safer place where they might not have been able to practice their religion as they liked.

Also, since the United States entered the war, there were continuous bombardments by the allied forces of U.S. and Britain; there were air raids, mostly in the middle of the night, when we had to get up, leave the apartment and hurry to an air raid shelter, hoping to make it before the bombs started to fall.

A refinery, shipbuilding and other industrial facilities were located along the Adriatic coast in or near Monfalcone; that was the reason for the air raids. The shelters were dug out of the rock, like a tunnel, and I remember sitting on the ground on a blanket and trying to sleep. The ordeal was made a little easier by the cookies, chocolate, etc., that my mother had always ready for such occasions in a small valise (I still remember the small yellow valise).

Judy and I were a little oblivious to what was going on around us: we continued to go to school every day, play outdoors after school and, during the summers, while our mother was at work, go to the beach with a baby sitter.

I was taking piano lessons, first from Aunt Gina, sister of Aunt Ledy (Uncle Herman's wife), then from Ica Weis, a friend of my cousin Caty. Ica lived in the building next to ours. Since we had no piano in our apartment, every day after school I went to her apartment to practice, as well as for my lessons. I learned to bike on the sidewalks surrounding our building; also my mother enrolled us in a class of "musical rhythmic exercises" with Mrs. Ermolli, who lived on the 5th floor of our building. Several of our school mates were in the class as well; it was a lot of fun especially when we put on a show attended by all family members at the end of the course. In other words, as all children would, we were having a good time, impervious to the danger, while war was raging all over Europe.

Father was allowed leave to visit the family seldom and I remember that on one such occasion, he brought Judy and me our first fountain pen, mine was pink and Judy's was grey and they had little tassels on the caps. He would enjoy helping us with our school work and just being with the family.

I also remember one trip that mother and the two of us took to Treviso to visit father, but the noises of war followed us there too.

I do not recall how come, but in the winter of 1941, during Christmas vacation, I alone spent some time in Grado where Uncle Martino was confined. Aunt Tilde was there too; there was not much to do in the winter in a beach town, it was cold, but we took walks and in the evening I

was allowed to play gin rummy with uncle and some of his friends, but only after Aunt Tilde ran me ragged with the multiplication tables!

I do recall us also spending some time in Grado in the summer of 1942 when also mother and father were there (I have some pictures of that time). Father visited us there, as well as Uncle Giuseppe. Strange how I recall Judy and me going to a shoe store with Aunt Tilde to buy us some shoes when our aunt had to bargain with the store clerk since we did not have the right coupons (everything was rationed by that time!). I remember very well the shoes, actually "zoccoli", mine with green leather top and Judy's with beige leather.

Another memory of Fiume is that of mother bringing home paperwork from the store. After dinner, with the help also of Aunt Tilde, we sat around the dining room table with large forms spread out where we had to attach the coupons cut from the ration cards, a tedious job that we considered fun, placing each coupon in the right spot.

And, talking of rationing, since sugar was rationed and some family members used more sugar then others, mother had put each family member's monthly sugar rations in separate containers and I remember bargaining with Aunt Tilde, since I liked my coffee bitter and had more left over at the end of the month, and she needed more than her ration. I do not recall what she offered in the bargain, but, possibly, allowing us to put our elbows on the table during meals or slurping our beverages!! She was a stickler for proper etiquette.

Unfortunately, we were not able to spend much time with our mother. After we got up in the morning, promptly at 6AM, after we heard grandfather closing the door to go to Schul, we had breakfast with mother and when we left for school, she went to the store. We saw her briefly at lunchtime then she went back to the store. When she came back in the evening we had dinner together and at 8PM we religiously went to bed every night after kissing her and repeating, every night: "bona note e bon riposo, domani quando ti va in negozio ancora un buci"(Good night and good rest, tomorrow when you go to the store another kiss). I can still remember the feel of her skin on my cheek: it was very soft.

1943

In the Summer of 1943, after I had completed 4th and my sister 3rd grade, my mother sent us to spend the summer holidays with Aunt Ledy and Uncle Ermanno (my mother's brother) and their two daughters Edda and Luci, in the Alps in Pieve di Cadore (near Cortina).

We were having a wonderful time enjoying our vacation: we went picking strawberries and cyclamens in the woods, picking figs from the trees and corn from the fields, enjoying the healthy mountain air and playing outdoor games with our cousins and the children of the area.

Unfortunately, such happy times did not last long: on September 8th, after the fall of Mussolini, Marshall Badoglio signed the armistice with the Americans, and that is when our family's real troubles began.

The Germans, who had been Italy's allies, were now our enemies, and in our country already.

We immediately returned to Trieste (that is where my aunt and uncle and cousins lived) since Pieve di Cadore, very close to the Austrian border, was already full of Germans, now our enemies. From Trieste my aunt was taking us back to my mother in Fiume, but, half way to Fiume, the train could not continue because the partisans (the Italian Resistance) had already blown up the tracks.

We therefore returned to Trieste. Another aunt, Matilde (whose husband, Martino, my mother's brother, was also interned) who lived in Fiume was planning to get out of the city and she tried to convince my mother and grandparents to leave as well, but my grandparents who, as I indicated before, were extremely orthodox, would not leave (they would not even have a glass of water outside their home). My mother chose to remain with her 84 years old parents after entrusting us to my Aunt Matilde.

So my aunt left, alone, with the few things she could carry and the few of our clothes that my mother gave her, part of the trip by horse drawn carriage. I understand that she was able to go to the bank and withdraw all the funds from the family's business accounts just minutes before the Nazis walked in and froze all the Jews' accounts. Those funds allowed the family to survive during the months in hiding.

I assume that my mother entrusted us to my aunt, sensing perhaps that she would never see us again. I can only imagine how difficult and heart wrenching her choice must have been.

At that point a lot of consultation must have gone on among all the relatives, but before the end of September 1943 we left Trieste with Aunt Tilde; I do not even recall how we reached Pesaro and then Fano, where Uncle Martino was interned. From there, with means that I barely recall, we reached Atri in the Province of Teramo in the Abruzzi region, in central Italy at the foot of the Gran Sasso Mountain in the Apennines. I do not remember well whether Uncle Martino was moved by the authorities, but apparently he must have left the location where he was interned since he was already in Atri when we arrived.

Keep in mind that by now Italy was overrun with Germans and it was not only difficult, but dangerous to travel without proper documents, so it was a very scary trip for two little girls 10 and 8 years old without their parents. I remember the trip as one of the worst time of my life. Part of the trip, mostly at night, we sat in the back of a truck carrying a load of large corrugated cardboard rolls; Aunt Tilde sat in front with the driver and we had to stay hidden behind the rolls and not emit a sound when the truck was stopped by authorities several times at road blocks. It was dark, very cold and we were very scared.

ATRI (in the province of Teramo)

And here begins our life in hiding:

We reached Atri, a small historic medieval town located just under the part of the Gran Sasso Mountain that was called "la bella addormentata" because the ridge looks just like a sleeping woman, in a beautiful Fall afternoon. When we reached the farmhouse at grape harvesting time, just at the town's outskirts, the men were building my sister's and my bed, which consisted of two sawhorses and a couple of wooden boards on top of which they put a big sac filled with

corn husks. Judy and I shared that bed, which was placed in the same room where our hosts and saviors slept, from September 1943 until July 1944; heat was generated by our bodies since the house had no heat, no running water, no electricity, no indoor plumbing.

The only warm room was the kitchen with the fireplace where everybody spent the day. The toilet was an outhouse located quite a way from the house itself, and chamber pots were the only facilities available during the night; during the day we had to walk to the outhouse, rain, shine or snow, and there was a lot of snow that winter. There was no way to bathe properly, at least not during the winter months; we washed in a manner that we then called “army style”: a washcloth and a basin of lukewarm water. In the Spring, a wooden wash tub was carried into the kitchen; water had to be fetched from a spring about a mile from the house in a wheelbarrow which was kept in the entrance hall outside the kitchen, or in copper containers carried on their head by the farm women. Water was heated in a big copper kettle in the fireplace. The only heat we had when going to bed was a contraption called “il prete” made of wood and reeds: a container with hot embers was placed at the base of this contraption and then placed between the sheets, in turn, in each bed for a little while before we went to bed. Otherwise the only heat was generated by the fact that my sister and I slept close together. Keep in mind that the temperature was always well below freezing during the winter and the snow outside sometime reached my shoulders.

Sometime during the winter we were joined by two other male distant cousins, Cori and Feri Goldstein, now Godelli, (second cousins to us) who were able to escape from an Italian internment camp in nearby Roseto (if I recall correctly). So now there were six of us in hiding but while the new arrivals spent the day in the kitchen with the rest of the family, they slept in a house a few hundred feet away. Also in the farmhouse next to ours there was another Jewish family: mother, father and young daughter (who caught Feri’s eye!), whose name I do not remember, but with whom we became friends.

For us city girls, life in the country was very exciting because very likely we were too young to understand the danger we were in. It was like a vacation.

I remember that when we found out that they were going to slaughter their pig in December, we insisted that we wanted to watch, so we got up at 5 AM in a freezing December morning; from outside our room on the second floor, wrapped in blankets, we and our young neighbors watched while the men worked in the open in the courtyard and the women in the kitchen. By nightfall everything was finished: salame, hams, sausages, etc., were prepared and stored away and the courtyard washed clean. When I remember this, I still marvel at how some people were able to live and survive by the use of their own hands, without any modern machinery, but especially without the basic needs such as running water.

Light was generated by oil or carbide lamps and cooking was done in the fireplace. Food, whatever there was, was cooked and eaten – no refrigeration of any kind -. Bread was made once a week by the farmer’s wife and baked in an outdoor oven, and our aunt told us after the war that she had to lock the bread between meals because my sister and I were always hungry (actually it was the only period of our life when we were really thin!!! And I have pictures to prove it.

Meat was wishful thinking, only farm raised chicken and rabbit once in a while. There was one butcher shop in the town where once I remember standing on line alone from very early morning till afternoon to take back only some tripe, a tongue and a few bones. Whatever money was available was used to buy some staples (oil, flour, rice, beans) which were then bartered for

other needed supplies. Homemade pasta, polenta and bread were the staples, but we were grateful for all the tomatoes preserves and sauces that the farmers had in their stores. I remember that one of my favorite foods was “minestra di pane” which consisted of old bread cooked in water with lots of rosemary, some beef bones and a little oil. One incident I recall vividly is when Uncle Martino purchased a sac of dried kidney beans to the great dismay of Aunt Tilde who indicated that she would not cook them, so uncle did the cooking and for a while we ate bean soup, bean salad, pureed bean with sautéed onions etc…so we did get our protein!!

Our aunt, always resourceful and always fanatic about education, was able to locate another Jewish family hiding in town where one family member had been a high school teacher, so she would come every day to give us lessons so that, even during such bad times, we should not miss a year of schooling. The farmers, all illiterate, could not understand why we spent most of the days with books instead of playing outdoors with the other children. But after the fact, we were grateful to Aunt Tilde for making sure that, when the war ended, we could go back to school without missing a year.

The winter was relatively peaceful, we only heard the bombardments in Ancona to the north and Chieti to the south and at night, we could see the flares illuminating the sky before the bombs fell. The house was on the main road where columns of German troops in trucks travelled every night. I do not remember whether north to south to reinforce their troops or south to north in retreat. (I guess they were retreating). I remember the noise always woke us up and often we stood behind the shutters watching. The Germans in town were probably also cold so they did not bother to look for deserters or Jews in the middle of the winter.

But one evening one truck broke down right in front of our house and something under the truck caught fire; light was to be avoided because it could be seen from the sky; so there was a lot of shouting in German and knocking on doors to ask for water to put the fire out. When the fire was put out, the passengers of the truck – about 5 or 6 German soldiers – took refuge in our house while waiting for assistance. I will never forget seeing a bunch of rifles leaning on both sides of the corridor, with all sort of ammunition: I had never seen such things close up, and it was scary.

All the soldiers sat in the kitchen with our family and the farmer and his wife. My aunt was obviously a courageous woman who, after telling us to keep quiet, had the guts to speak German, explaining that we were refugees from a big city trying to escape the bombardments and giving as the invented reason for her knowledge of the German language a stay in an Austrian boarding school. The young soldiers stayed all night, some of them cried because they did not know whether their own families were safe or not in Germany…

Judy and I were ordered to bed since my aunt knew that we sometime addressed my uncle with his Jewish name and that would give us all away. By the time we got up the soldiers were gone.

The Allied troops that were advancing north on our side of Italy, the 8th Army, were stuck in Monte Cassino for a very long time and the only way we could get the news was from a radio in the house of the engineer befriended by Uncle Martino, who ran the electric generating plant for the town – as I indicated before, electricity did not reach our farmhouse. So Aunt Tilde and Uncle Martino would walk to that house, almost every night, where they were able to listen to Radio London with their heads close to the radio and covered by a blanket to prevent the sound to be heard outside by passing patrols. When they returned to the house, with a big map spread over the kitchen table surrounded by all the immediate neighbors they would show how

and where the advance of the allied forces was progressing. I remember that once they allowed us to go with them to hear the radio and we were very excited, but could not understand all the strange passwords that were announced, we thought it was a game!! That is where we heard for the first time the opening notes of the 5th symphony and, I guess, my love for Beethoven began (I understand that those four notes, in Morse code, mean "victory').

I must mention that, although our life was constantly in great danger, Uncle Martino always found a way to make people laugh and to kid with us. One of the things I remember is that when he came back from listening to the news, he walked in the kitchen with a big smile, singing loudly and in tone "Buona sera, miei signori" from the Barber of Seville, then when the other farmers walked in, he would encourage their entry by always saying "venite, venite, fate come se questa fosse casa vostra", always with a big smile, while it was their house we were in. Maybe it was his jovial manner and his pleasant and fun personality that made him our favorite uncle.

I do remember when Monte Cassino was breached because then the allied forces (the 8th Army) started moving a little faster.

During the winter, at least until February 1944, we had mail, censured, of course, from my father who eventually fled Treviso and joined the Resistance in the countryside. I remember when the letter came in which, somehow, my father was able to tell my uncle that my mother and grandparents were taken by the Nazis. I remember because I saw tears in my uncle's eyes and he left the kitchen for their bedroom. We were not told at that time the sad news, but we did not hear or see my father again until the summer of 1945

However, in Atri, with the arrival of spring, the Germans, now being pushed north, started searching the town for deserters, but especially for Jews. But the townspeople were our friends: they always sent a youngster running from the town to warn us each time a round up started. The kid would run yelling "rastrellamento, rastrellamento"… We were always prepared for such events, so, without delay, we would run in the woods far away from the town; we would look for a distant farmhouse, away from the main road, where the woman of the house would cook polenta for us and sell us some cheese and bread. Those farmers easily either believed that we were on a sightseeing trip or did not know what was going on in the world outside the confines of their farm.

This happened many times and some time I wonder how Alfonso and Gioconda Nardi (these are the names of the couple) were able to hide all the signs of our presence in the farmhouse especially the Jewish signs, since Uncle Martino prayed every morning with tallit, tefillin and prayer book.

To this day I marvel at how many good people, from the marshal of the Carabinieri to the humblest farmer, risked their life to protect us.

While winter had been a scary time and the war was still raging south of us, with the arrival of Spring Judy and I were having a good time again.

We befriended the children of the farmers, took the sheep to pasture with them and went searching for chamomile flowers and licorice roots (the bigger children worked in the licorice factory in town), in other words, not knowing what happened to our family up north, we were behaving like children on vacation in the country.

In the Spring, we watched as the sheep were sheared (the Nardis owned 5 sheep, one pig, rabbits and chickens), we walked to the spinning mill where the raw wool was washed and spun, then brought home and dyed. We saw how country folks lived their everyday life. A positive thing that happened is that, from the women, I learned how to knit well and I made scarves, gloves and socks for the family. Also Aunt Tilde befriended a very nice lady who lived in a beautiful house in town and where she would send me once in a while to learn the finest points of knitting. Apparently I was also declared the family's mender: I cannot remember how many socks I mended for everyone! All this while planes flew overhead on route to locations that were constantly being bombed.

We even thought it was fun to see allied planes, in full daylight, bomb a bridge across the Vomano River which was only about 10 miles by air from our town; with naked eyes we saw the bridge split in two and fall in the river.

So we were really enjoying being outdoor and doing things we could never do in the city. Most of the time fear did not enter our minds.

When the allied troops reached a town just south of Atri ,Citta' Sant'Angelo, aunt and uncle decided that they wanted to go there to see if, through the Red Cross, they could send a message to their daughter in NY (Bandi was in the Army) to let her know that we were alive. So we all travelled at night on foot for about 10 kilometers only to find out that there was no possibility of sending a telegram. It was a scary night, especially because Judy was sick and we had to stop, on the way, at a small farm and ask them to let her rest for a while. I remember her lying on a kitchen table being tended by the friendly farmers. I remember that I was very scared for my sister, whom I loved very much.

Finally the allied troops were almost at the gates of Atri and we had to leave the farmhouse and move to town in another house, while Uncle Martino hid in the attic of yet another house, the danger being greater for men, because there were many deserters in town and the Germans were running and shooting all over town; we could hear the shouts of "Halt, Halt", and the sound of gunfire all around us.

The Germans had put mines in the road leading into town so nobody was taking a chance and walking in the streets. I remember a few very scary days and nights and I especially remember Judy crying all the time from fear.

Finally the allied troops entered Atri, after minesweeper troops cleared the roadway to its gate. It was June 13, 1944.

I remember trucks entering the main square with American soldiers tossing candies and cigarettes and a lot of welcoming shouting.

I also remember my aunt telling us how she spoke up in favor of the local head of the Fascist party with the officer in charge of the allied troops, telling him that he had not betrayed the Jews. I believe that she actually saved his life since the Italians who were against fascism did not care about the law at that time and were arresting and killing the opposition without any trial.

So, finally life without fear could resume. One afternoon at the end of June, I walked to the town school to take the exam to be admitted to middle school, after completing fifth grade at home; there was just another boy in the room, no papers, only the blackboard. I do not know why the

test was so easy, I only remember one geometry question and one Italian question; I was there no more than half an hour, but I passed and was admitted to Prima Media.

Istituto Mandocchi – 1944-1945

Well, the new problem that came up for my aunt and uncle was what to do with two little girls when they needed to leave to see what happened to the rest of the family that had been in hiding in neighboring regions, but also to resume some business in order to make a living. They did not know at that point what happened to my father, if he was still alive or where he might have ended up. I believe that, at that point, they thought we were orphaned of both parents. Obviously they could not take us with them.

I do not know how my aunt found out that there was an institute in town run by the Catholic Ravasco Nuns whose work consisted of teaching the local young girls how to sew and embroider; they made clothes, as well as hand embroidered linens for the local brides. Apparently the Mother Superior, Suor Giuseppina Calleri, was a kind soul who accepted to board us there with the promise that they would not try to convert us. I do not know whether any money was promised, since at that point in time I do not believe there was any.

So, toward the end of June or early July 1944 Aunt Tilde took us to the Institute located in a large palace at the edge of town, across the street from Atri's main church. The mother superior, Suor Giuseppina, received us and then we met the other nuns, Suor Amelia who taught tailoring, Suor Tommasina who taught embroidery and Suor Cornelia, the cook. An older local lady was also part of the staff; she was a housekeeper, factotum and nurse, when necessary. I remember that when, in playing, I sprained an ankle she put a cast on it which consisted of gauze bandages soaked in slightly beaten egg whites. I am sure that, in a pinch, the remedy would also work very well today. The only other employee that I recall was an older man whose main job was doorman and handyman.

Periodically the estate manager, who usually travelled between the various farms which were part of the estate, came to meet with Suor Giuseppina. I remember us following her to the big store room, where she inspected all the produce that was brought in.

While the first few days there were horrible for us, especially for my younger sister who cried a lot, we eventually got used to living there, especially since the nuns were the kindest and nicest persons.

Since the nuns were the beneficiaries of the large estate of a rich landowner, Vittorio Mandocchi, who had passed, for the first time since the beginning of the war we had all the delicious food in the world: freshly baked bread, fresh vegetables and fruit, meats and desserts.

While we finally slept in our own separate beds and had running water, for some reason, at the beginning, we still had no electricity, so oil lamps were the norm. It took us a while to get used to the surroundings and I remember that during the first night we were very scared by strange noises which were explained as mice running around between the roof and the ceiling!!

I believe that the scariest thing for us, especially for Judy, was finding ourselves without our family and with people that were total strangers to us. But the nuns were extremely kind to us and, within a brief period of time, we became comfortable in our new surroundings.

So, while the war continued north of Atri for almost another year, the summer of 1944 for us was just like a country vacation. We played in the garden and often travelled with the mother superior, by horse and carriage, to the various lands owned by the institute, so we discovered a beautiful part of Italy that we probably would have never gotten to know had there not been a war. While there, we were also taught discipline, good manners, how to eat properly, etc. During the Christmas holidays we were taken to Midnight Mass, which was, of course, a big production at the main church, not in the mansion's chapel.

That was the first time that we had set foot in a church.

During daily masses in the Institute's chapel, we sat next to the Mother Superior, who apparently did not want to leave us alone, in the rear of the chapel. We stood when she stood and sat when she sat, but we were not asked to kneel. Mother Superior also played the organ, so we found the time spent in the chapel a musical experience.

In October we entered the local schools Judy in quinta elementare and I in prima media, and, in order to make life more pleasant for us, the nuns took in as boarders several other girls around our age, so we also had playmates. All the other girls received religious instructions, went to mass as well as afternoon ceremonies. But, after studying in the afternoon, in the evenings we sang a lot and had fun.

During the month of May 1945 five of the younger girls were to receive first communion and I do remember all the ceremony connected with the religious rites: the girls dressed in white like brides, the solemn singing and the festivities afterward. I remember one thing that moved me a lot: one of the girls, aged 7 or 8, had suffered polio and was forced to limp very badly because of the damage the illness had done to her legs. Her parents were farm workers who could not attend the ceremony that day, so the nuns restaged the whole ceremony for that girl, whose name was Annunziata, on another day just so that her parents could attend and feel that they witnessed an important event in their daughter's life. A true act of love!

The widow of Mr. Mandocchi, Elena, was still alive then and lived in the building cared for by the nuns, in an apartment set aside for her own use; a beautiful, elegant woman whom we saw very seldom, mostly on Sundays and holidays when she attended Chapel.

In early spring 1945 a ceremony was organized when a plaque was placed on the front of the building to honor the town's benefactor, Vittorio Mandocchi. I do remember the ceremony, attended by the citizens and watched by his widow from behind the shutters of the first floor of the building. Someone put music to the words on the plaque and we sang them; to this day, I can remember and still sing them
These are the words, in Italian:

"Vittorio Mandocchi,
mente illuminata, cuore generoso,
intese la ricchezza mezzo di
Cristiana carita'; tutta la vita
apostolato di bene;
fondo' quest'istituto

affidato alle Suore Ravasco
a gratuita educazione a morale
tutela della gioventu' famminile,
lasciando di se fulgido esempio,
meritando infinita
riconoscenza in terra,
eterno premio in cielo"

Istituto Mandochi is still there, serving the town by educating its young women.

Actually, after the war ended and we were reunited with the rest of the family, we were told that our Aunt Tilde wanted us to learn the skills the nuns were teaching the local girls because nobody knew then if either of our parents were alive and if not, who would be able to take care of us and how; whether the family business, if it could be restarted, could also support us. She was right in wanting us to learn a trade that would allow us to make a living.

So, while living with the farmers I learned how to knit, then with the nuns I also learned how to embroider, which I still love to do. I also learned a bit of Genovese cooking since Suor Cornelia, the cook, was a magnificent cook, originally from Genova.

1945

In the spring of 1945, while we were in Atri, our Aunt Regina, my father's sister, came to visit us. At that time we did not know how she found us and where she had been. We found out afterward that she had been confined to a small town in the Marche region (her story was written in a book…) and that she apparently found us through other members of my mother's family. I remember the small parlor where we sat with Suor Giuseppina and with our aunt from whom we found out only then that my mother was gone. I do not remember crying, but I remember that Judy cried a lot. I do remember, however, that when later we were finally reunited with our father, from time to time, when he was upset with me, he rebuked me for the fact that I did not cry when told the bad news. He would call me "figlia snaturata". Unfortunately, my relationship with my father never returned to what it was before the war.

I do not remember hearing from any members of our family during the time spent at Istituto Mandocchi, but I do remember receiving packages containing clothing, shoes, etc., I believe probably from organizations such as UNRRA, HIAS or Joint Distribution Committee, organizations who gave assistance to people displaced by the war.

San Benedetto del Tronto - 1945

The war finally ended in the Spring of 1945 and at the end of the school year, we left Atri to be with another aunt (my mother's sister Dora) and her husband, Uncle Beni in the town of San Benedetto del Tronto, in the Marche region a little north of Atri, in the house of its mayor no less,

where they had been in hiding. There we found out that their son, Andi, had been killed during a battle while serving in the Army, just shortly before the end of hostilities.

Again, I do not remember how we arrived in San Benedetto, but I do remember that part of the trip was in the sidecar of a motorcycle, Judy sitting between my legs. I do not remember it as a fun trip. I do not remember who the man was who drove the motorcycle, but obviously, either a friend of the family or someone the nuns could rely on.

We spent the summer in San Benedetto, a lovely small town on the Adriatic, with a lovely sandy beach. I do not remember exactly how and when, but at one point we were joined by my Aunt Regina, and a niece of Uncle Beni, Frida Reingewurtz, with her dog Supi (who ate chocolate …!?). There were two bedrooms in the apartment, one occupied by Aunt Dora and Uncle Beni and the other with the following sleeping arrangements: Frida and Aunt Regina slept on the big bed, Judy and I on a mattress on the floor and the dog under the bed.

It was summertime, so we were at the beach every day having a good time (Aunt Dora had bathing suits knitted for us) while Uncle Beni sat at the dining room table playing solitaire all day. I guess that, saddened by the recent loss of his son, he was not in a good mood most of the time. He did help us, however, with the homework assigned by the school for the summer months. The only bad thing I remember of that summer is a horrible sunburn that both Judy and I got (we were playing at the beach the whole day every day) for which the remedy was a mixture of olive oil with wine vinegar!! Who knew of sun screen, and who had money to buy it!!!

Life for Judy and me was good during that time, we were happy to be with family. Food was still a problem since some staples were not readily available yet or were limited. I remember that once, after skimming the cream from the boiled milk, at Uncle Beni's suggestion, we tried to make butter by shaking the cream in a bottle, but then when it had solidified, we could not remove it from the bottle because the opening was too small; it was one time that even Uncle Beni laughed. Any baking was prepared at home and then taken to the local bakery because there was no oven in the apartment. Also no refrigeration, so food was bought and prepared every day. One unusual thing I remember from that time is that some foods were stored in the attic where eggs were stored in liquefied plaster of Paris (it was explained that it was a way to keep them cool and fresh!!!) One thing is sure: even with these primordial methods of keeping foods, we were never sick to our stomach.

Members of the allied military forces were still in town and in the evening in the park along the boardwalk, they organized concerts and dancing, open to the public, while people walked the lungomare along the sea and enjoyed the fresh air. There were some Polish soldiers stationed there, so Aunt Regina had occasions to speak her native language once in a while. One funny thing I remember well is that one evening, walking along with Judy and Aunt Regina, I saw for the first time in my life a live black soldier and I became a little scared and wanted to cross the street, because at that age, 11, and with little knowledge of the world, I thought that black people were wild and living in Africa.

I remember that 1945 summer as a happy time: the only sad event was that every afternoon when a train carrying returning soldiers from the North, as far north as Russia, was due; a lot of women of all ages would walk in front of our building on the way to the railroad station, hoping to welcome back a loved one from the war. Few came back happy and in the company of a son, brother, husband or father: the return walk was a very sad one for most of those women.

Sometime during the summer of 1945 we were reunited with my father (I do not know where he arrived from and how he found out where we were, but obviously he was able to contact some members of my mother's family who knew where we were). He spent a little time with us, but I do not remember if I found happiness in meeting him again: we had not seen him since 1942! We had a picture taken so he could take it with him on his return trip to Fiume, now occupied by Tito, where he was going to see if life could be restarted there, where he had left a business, a home and all our belongings. Our relationship with our father was never again what it had been prior to the war; Judy was able to deal with him a little better, but we never were really close again. The loss of my mother left him with a sadness that did not allow him to enjoy life for the rest of his days, nor did it encourage a happy relationship with his daughters.

At that time Fiume was still part of Italy, but the political situation was very uncertain. After a few months, father decided to leave the city with some belongings, some of them recovered in Pisino, from Carmen, the maid who was in our service in 1943 and who, apparently not only directed the Fascists to our family, and caused their deportation, but also stole things from us.

Strange how some Italians, like the Nardi family, risked their lives to save Jews, without much or any compensation, while others betrayed them and stole from them! It is difficult to understand human nature!

I do not know exactly when father decided to leave Fiume, but I am sure that he must have consulted with our mother's family in Trieste before reaching a decision to resettle in Treviso, near Venice, where he had been confined by the Fascists from 1941 to 1943. He had made many friends there and he was hoping to restart an activity that would produce some income, but, unfortunately, he would never be able to provide for us again.

Calolziocorte – Foppenico (in the province of Bergamo)

So the family decided to look for another boarding school for us, but up north, to be nearer to the rest of the family. Aunt Dora and Uncle Beni, as well as Aunt Anna and Uncle Bela returned to Trieste; Uncle Ermanno, Aunt Ledy and their two daughters Edda and Luci had also returned to Trieste from their hiding place in Montagnana, a small town in the Padova province; Uncle Mano, Aunt Medi and their son Laci had returned to their home in Milano after hiding in Switzerland.

I do not know how the family found another religious institute, run by the Orsoline nuns, in a small town in the Bergamo province, now Lecco province, at the foot of the Prealps. The institute was located in the hamlet of Foppenico within the town of Calolziocorte. The nuns had moved from their main home in Milano to escape the bombardments and were running there a school (elementary, middle and Magistrali) and a small boarding school. It is possible that our family had been in contact with the Schecter and Gang families, also from Fiume, whose children were in school with us in Fiume and had been able to escape and hide in Calolziocorte. So, that might have been the reason for their choice.

At the end of summer 1945 we travelled to Calolziocorte, located on the shore of Lake Como at the foot of the Alps. I do not remember at all by what means we reached the town, but we were ready to resume school, Judy in the first class and I in the second class of Scuole Medie.

While the nuns provided education and amusements during free time from studies, we were not happy there, as a matter of fact, Judy was very unhappy. We did not like the sleeping arrangements, the older girls always bothered the younger girls with silly pranks, the food was terrible. While in Atri we had the best food, in Calolziocorte in the immediate post-war northern part of Italy (the war had finally ended in April and we had arrived there in October) everybody had to do with what was available: soup was made with mixes that were probably sent from the U.S., very little meat was available (and that of the worst cuts), few vegetables, lots of potatoes, bread was of the worst quality and in it we always found small stones, pieces of rope and other foreign objects; of course, no refined flour, only whole grain (funny, how today, we always look for whole grain products!) In other words the only good foods we had some time were from care packages from the U.S.

We did do well and enjoyed our studies. I remember that, with the help of an older girl, I started writing poetry; I liked Italian, Latin, history, French; I did not like math much. Judy was never too keen on studying but we both passed into the next grade.

One good thing that happened in Calolziocorte is music: the nun who played the organ in the chapel, also taught us music. She played the piano and got together a small group of the girls who had singing voices and who enjoyed classical music (Judy was the best in the group). There is where we learned to sing “Va pensiero. from Verdi’s Nabucco and other choral pieces from operas. Judy’s love of singing, of course, followed her later to New York.

While studying took most of our time, we also had some fun. There was a very large garden and playing area where we enjoyed all sorts of games every day. Also during Carnival, we put on shows, musical and comedies, and Judy and I enjoyed our roles on the stage which was built in our large recreation room and where we spent part of every afternoon, rehearsing, trying costumes and behaving as all children would. The performances were open to the public, mostly parents, family and friends of all the students, and were given throughout the Carnival period.

In the spring we took long walks to the shores of Lake Como (the location is mentioned at the very beginning of the “Promessi Sposi” by Manzoni as “quell ramo del lago di Como che volge a mezzogiorno).

We also took long walks up the steep hills to what was called “Il castello dell’Innominato”, the ruins of an old castle, also described by Manzoni. In early spring we would take a cable car ride up a mountain. It was a beautiful ride, from Calolziocorte to Erve, right under Mount Resegona, and enjoyed picking “bucaneve”, the first flowers breaking through the snow.

Our family had arranged for us to have Shabbat dinner every Friday evening at the Schechters (their oldest son had been my classmate in Fiume from 1st to 4th grade): the food, in the Jewish tradition, was good, but we really did not enjoy the visits, maybe because the family was very orthodox and we had been away from our religion for so long. The Schecter family did not appreciate the fact that we were in a Catholic school while Judy and I did not care about religion at that time: we studied because that was a must, but we also had a good time.

I do not recall whether, during the school years we spent in Atri and in Calolziocorte, there was any correspondence between our family and us, but I am sure that the nuns kept the family informed.

1946 – Milano – Trieste

At the end of the school year in June of 1946 we went to Milano to stay for a while with Uncle Mano and Aunt Medi and our cousin Laci. It was a very hot summer, and we spent most of the time on the terrace, in bathing suits, cooling off with the water hose and just enjoying family life. We reconnected with an old family friend from Fiume, Goti Bauer, who had been lucky enough to survive Auschwitz. My aunt and uncle were hoping that their son would marry Goti, but it did not happen. However, they have remained friends to this day.

We also had occasion to meet and spend some time with the Welzel sisters, daughters of our uncles' business partner from Genova, and we had a pleasant time roaming Milano with them.

Mid-summer we went to Trieste where we spent the rest of the Summer with Aunt Ledi, Uncle Ermanno and their daughters, Edda and Luci. Vacation time was always pleasant, mornings at the beach, afternoon walking around town and trying not to bother too much our cousins who had to do some studying for repeat exams in September.

1946 – 1949 - Istituto Campostrini – Lido di Venezia

Our family had found another school, closer to Trieste, where we could continue our studies: Istituto Campostrini located at Lido, in Venice. I never found out how our uncles located this school that would be willing to board non-Christian girls; possibly through Aunt Rita, a sister of Aunt Ledy, who lived in Venice.

During the weeks preceding our departure for Venice, Aunt Ledy had new clothes made for us as well as providing all the necessary linens, blankets, etc., that the boarding school required. She tried and succeeded in being a very good substitute mother.

At any rate, at the beginning of October, accompanied by Aunt Ledy, we arrived at the school in Lido di Venezia in late afternoon on a rainy day which made for a sad beginning of our stay: It is easy to start a new life in the morning in the light of day, but sad in the evening, especially in a dark and humid Venice.

I remember how difficult it was for us to be in new surroundings, with strange people, however nice, and no family near us.

I do remember that Judy was especially sad, but, with daylight the next day, we began to adjust to the new surroundings, new beds, new nuns (some nicer than others) and, within a few days, new schoolmates. I began "terza media" and Judy "seconda media".

I was also able to resume my piano studies with a very nice teacher who came from Venice every week to give piano lessons to some of the girls. She was a fun person who made the lessons a pleasure. She also loved Dante and she made for me a topographic drawing that I still have today, of the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. While I started reading the Divina Commedia in detail only a few years later, that drawing allowed me to visualize and understand better Dante's peregrinations.

The school was located just across the street from the beautiful Lido beach where we would take long walks every day after lunch. In the winter we were always accompanied by one of the nuns while in the spring and early summer, when we were allowed to wear a bathing suit, we were accompanied by one of the lay teachers. There was an inspection of bathing suits by one of the nuns, to make sure that they were modest and not racy, but one of the pretty young girls, Vilma was her name, found a way to wear her bikini anyway: She just would wear a one-piece bathing suit, over her bikini, which she would remove when we got to the beach. We were not allowed to go in the water, but, when in early June the temperature got warm, we would go swimming anyway, while the teacher looked the other way. Since we only wore a cotton uniform over the suit, the wetness would show through when we returned to the school and we were reprimanded.

In June of 1947 Judy had good marks and passed to the Terza Media, while I passed the exams to be admitted to Ginnasio. After some heated arguments with the family, especially Uncle Ermanno, who, as a businessman wanted me to go to a business school, Istituto Tecnico Commerciale, to learn what would serve me well both in Italy, as well as in New York, where my father was already planning to emigrate, I won by threatening to stop going to school unless I could frequent Liceo Classico.

Istituto Campostrini only offered classes up to Terza Media, so I registered at the Liceo Classico Marco Polo, based in Venice itself, but with a branch at the Lido, where I began Quarta Ginnasio in October 1948, while Judy continued in Terza Media at the Institute.

It was fun leaving the Institute to walk to school alone every day. I would walk along the lagoon on good days and away from the water on foggy days since the fog along the lagoon is so thick some times and you could easily bump in the person walking in the opposite direction. It was strange, during the first winter, to hear the foghorns of the vaporetti sounding constantly to avoid collision: it is so typical of Venice and I do still hear that sound in my head sometimes.

I soon befriended some of my school mates, especially some of them, Annamaria Alboini and Ines Caraceni, whom I picked up on my way to school. Ines would often join me after lunch and we studied together in the afternoon. It made it easier and more productive to study together, especially when encountering new subjects such as Greek.

Marco Polo was a co-ed school, so it was my first contact, as a 14 year old, with boys my age which made school more fun. Also it was my first experience, outside a controlled environment, to hear other people's way of thinking and to discuss subjects which were not part of the school curriculum and were forbidden at the Institute where, during the recreation periods in the afternoons, we were not permitted to walk around or sit in groups of two – the old French saying "pas a deux" was in force. At Marco Polo I remember one of the other girls in particular, Luciana, because she first exposed me to the music of Gershwin when on a side visit to her house she played for me a recording of his Concerto in F.

At that time I always thought that the nuns trusted me to behave properly on my daily outings to school until one day they took me, almost by force, to be checked by the doctor. I realized only afterward that, because I had become very fat and had a big belly, they thought I might have swayed from the right way and be pregnant: the doctor convinced them that I was just fat and the nuns never questioned my rectitude again.

They probably never found out that, on a few occasion, when a professor was absent for some reason and school was dismissed, the whole class, or most of it, just went to walk on the beach,

all the way to the old hotels, the Des Bains and the Excelsior, at that time empty and in disrepair because of the war. When I now see pictures of the Excelsior, it is hard to remember how it was then, empty, broken windows, only weeds growing where there should have been beautiful gardens.

The boys at the school were not interested in me, of course, but very interested in some of the other girls at the Institute. They could see all of them since only a tall wire fence separated our playground and tennis court from the road. One boy in particular lived across the street and from his second story balcony had a full view of our school and was very interested in two of the girls, both already 15, a couple of years older than me. Also on Sundays we were taken for walks outside the Institute along the main roads and some of the kids, on seeing young girls in uniform, accompanied by nuns, would sing “Tra le rose ed I fiori anche I gigli stanno bene, noi vogliamo tanto bene alla madre superiora”

One of the boys in my class was a few years older than the other classmates (he was repeating the class for the second time) and, during the summer, he would play the piano in one of the local dance halls, so, when Carnival came around, I asked him if he would play at our Institute during our musical presentations and he did, causing a flutter in many of the girls’ hearts since he was very handsome (tall, blonde and blue-eyed!). Believe it or not, he became smitten by one of the young nuns and he would always ask me about her.

The only exciting thing that happened during that first school year is that, in the spring of 1948 I managed to get the mumps, therefore, I was relegated and actually locked in my room, in the separate building that served as a nursing home for a few elderly persons. I guess the nuns were super cautious about contagion so, for almost two weeks, the only person I saw in my room was the nurse who brought me my food, my medications and who checked on the status of the disease. I communicated with Judy and the other girls through the second story window and was given a basket on a rope so that Judy could send me up school papers and other reading material to pass the time. It was awful to be confined in such a manner, but it all passed and normal life resumed.

Nothing much happened during that school year: Father came to visit us from Treviso a couple of times and we spent the Christmas and Easter holidays with him and his sister, Aunt Regina, who was living with him. Aunt Regina made those times pleasant since father never had any interest in anything fun, but especially, he never understood the needs of two young girls.

If I recall correctly, some of the cousins from the U.S. came to Italy in either 1947 or 1948. I recall that Nerina came to visit us at the school and, since she found out that there was a tennis court there, she brought us, as gift, two tennis racquets. Believe it or not, those two racquets came with us when we came to the U.S. in 1951.

At the end of the 1947/1948 school year, in June, Aunt Ledi arranged for Judy and I to spend the summer in the mountains in Asiago at a Summer Institute run by the Orsoline nuns. It was a beautiful summer: I recall cool, sunny days, very few rainy days, long walks along mountain roads, good food (finally) and lots of fun and games.

The girls were divided in groups, according to age, and Judy and I were in the group of the “grandi” who were taken on long day long trips, carrying with us food and drink and stopping mid day for lunch, returning to the house only in late afternoon. During the days when there were no trips, we would all take afternoon naps; Judy and I had our own room on the top floor and our window opened to the mountain and I remember loving that peaceful time during which I

enjoyed reading. I do recall the French book I was reading at that time, and, although I do not recall the title of the book, I do recall the foreword: “Ceux qui n’ont jamais souffert ne connaissent rien de la vie, leur esprit est comme un desert ou pas une herbe est fleuri”. It seemed to fit our lives at that point; strange how some things never leave your memory!!

At the end of summer 1948, we returned to Trieste and then back to Venice where I entered the Quinta Ginnasio and Judy, having passed the Terza Media exams, enrolled at the Istituto Tecnico Commerciale Paolo Sarpi in Venice, (Uncle Ermanno managed to get at least once niece in an accounting school!) so she too left every morning to take the Vaporetto to Venice.

To this day I marvel at how the nuns allowed us to be outside their immediate supervision every school day, but then I realize that those were “altri tempi” when young girls knew how to behave and were safe alone on the streets of Venice. Judy never was in love with school, so she never spoke much about her studies, but she managed to end each school year without problems and passing.

I did not pass two subjects at the exams for the admission to Liceo, so, after spending a hot Summer studying in Treviso, at the end of September I returned to Istituto Campostrini and stayed there while taking two exams again (believe it or not, while I was not surprised by not passing math, I was shocked by not passing Italian (“fuori tema” in the written exam), one of my favorite subjects. I passed the exams and returned to Treviso where Judy and I would start classes in new schools, Judy in the second year at Istituto Tecnico Commerciale Ricatti and I in prima Liceo at the Liceo Classico Antonio Canova. So, father had finally managed to convince our uncles that we should live with him.

One final thought about our years at Istituto Campostrini: we did study a lot, but we also had fun. We learned how to live with other young people of different background, how to accept things that, although right, we did not like, how to make compromises and how to acknowledge that some time we were wrong.
The good things included music: beside piano lessons, since we both, especially Judy, had good voices, we sang, both during musical events, and also in the choir in the chapel during religious functions; there is a lot of discipline involved in group singing!

1949/1951 - Treviso

So, after all the years away from him, we were living with father in Treviso. His sister, Aunt Regina, had left for Israel; the fun we had managed to have with her was now gone and only gloom and doom reigned in the apartment. It was not a very comfortable place, there was no hot water and, for most of the time, no gas, so cooking was done on a wood fired stove where water was also heated for bathing, dishwashing and laundry. No refrigerator, which is what we had been accustomed to anyway prior and during the war, so food shopping was done every day and only non-perishable food could be stored. I do remember the delicious bread which was purchased fresh every day from a nearby bakery.

Father had hired a maid who did the cleaning, laundry, shopping and cooking while he himself did the buying of some of the things he liked best, like some of the cheeses, in his favorite stores. Since we lived outside the city proper, travelling was done by bike or by foot. We walked

to school every day and, since my school was a little farther than Judy's, we did not even leave the apartment together.

I loved my school and made some new friends there, but socializing was very difficult because father did not allow us to go anywhere. A movie on Saturday afternoons was the only fun we usually shared with some of our school mates. On Sunday afternoons in the summer, Judy and I would take a walk in the city and enjoyed just window shopping and maybe an ice cream. Treviso is a beautiful city, dating back to the Renaissance; we would walk under the portici by the piazza della Signoria and all the way to the other end of the city. It seemed that everybody was out doing the same thing, at least during sunny days.

But even that fun was taken away from us when we found out that father was secretly following us; mind you, I was already 16 years old!

He obviously did not know or understand that we were "good" girls and did not trust us. I recall that, only once, after we had to beg him for it, he allowed us to go to an afternoon dance ("the danzante") which was organized on some weekends by one of the schools, the Liceo Scientifico, at a local night club. I guess he thought that the location was not reputable just because it was a night club. Unfortunately, father demonstrated constantly that he had no idea about how young people our age lived and that some fun outside the family home was permitted.

We dreaded the times when, once during each trimester, a parent was required to meet with our professors; we knew he would embarrass us since he would probably discuss our private life instead of just listening whether our school work was satisfactory; he had a way of telling everyone about the tragedy that befell him and us during the war. When we got some barely satisfactory marks, his comment was the same as when we got some excellent marks, just a grunt, no difference between displeasure or pleasure.

While he tried to do something nice for us once in a while – like when he dragged the bulky radio from the kitchen to our bedroom when I was forced in bed for over a week by the flu, just so that I could listen to some music – most of the time there was hardly any conversation between us. In the evening he read the paper while we listened to our favorite programs on the radio – that is when they did not interfere with the news programs he wanted to hear.

On Sunday afternoons we would visit sometime one of Judy's school mates who had an understanding mother who permitted us to smoke one cigarette in the house. She believed that since smoking was part of growing up, we should do it within the family. Father did not know that we had tried smoking and in those days you could buy one or two cigarettes at a time at the tobacco shop; once in a while the girls would smoke in the ladies' room during recess, then, when the smoke could be smelled outside, the janitor would walk in on us and threaten to tell (nobody told the boys they could not smoke in the men's room!!).

So, summer passed, and another school year began in October 1949. Not much happened during the winter: once in a while we had a visit from Uncle Giuseppe (mother's brother) who on occasions had to be in Treviso for business. Studies occupied most of our time so afternoons and even part of Sundays were spent studying.

We already knew in 1950 that father was planning and trying to come to the U.S. I must admit that we were not happy about the idea: we had just settled in new schools, made new friends and were looking forward to staying put in one place

We participated in one happy family event in the summer of 1950: our cousin Laci was getting married and we were invited to the wedding in Milano, so Aunt Ledy gave instructions to father about what dresses and shoes we were to get and we were very excited about going to Milano. I do not recall exactly how we got there, but I believe Uncle Giuseppe picked us up by car and we stayed at Uncle Mano and Aunt Medi, Laci's parents. We were very happy to be with the whole family for a happy occasion. We had a good time in Milano for a few days, especially rehashing our life with Luci and Edda, who had just gotten divorced from her first husband, and told us all about her miserable life in Rome. These are the cousins closest to us in age, so we always enjoyed our times together.

We had a good time at the wedding, especially since it was the only time, after the war, that we were together with the whole family. I will never forget the big laugh we had at the reception: Edda, Luci, Judy and I, as well as Silvana, the bride, were all dressed in short white dresses and, when Silvana came to sit with us at our table for a while, a waiter serving us asked, "Who is the bride?" We had followed Aunt Ledi's instruction about the color of our dresses and I guess she picked the same color for her daughters. Small things made us laugh happily in those days.

After the wedding we were invited by our Aunts Anna and Ledi to join them and cousins Edda and Luci in Rapallo for a brief vacation; funny that Laci and Silvana were going there on their wedding trip! We did not travel with the newlyweds, but we ended up spending a lot of time enjoying the Italian Riviera together. Father had been instructed to send some of the necessary clothing and Aunt Ledi bought for us what was missing so that we were able to enjoy our next to last Summer in Italy. We stayed at the apartment Aunt Anna had rented and, if I recall correctly, either Andrea or Lynn or both of them were staying there at the same time.

We were sad when we had to leave the rest of the family, but even sadder when we rejoined our father in Treviso for what was to be our last school year in Italy, a very uneventful, but for us, sad period. While Judy and I were not looking forward to leaving Italy, many of our school friends envied us and our father, of course, kept telling us that life would be better for us in New York. I was especially unhappy about not being able to finish Liceo in Italy and about leaving some very good new friends.

1951- Bagnoli

So, in July 1951 we left for Bagnoli (near Naples) the location where the IRO (International Refugee Organization) was processing persons, displaced by the war, who wanted to emigrate to other countries, including the U.S.A. We were classified as "apolidi" stateless people, because Fiume was no longer Italy and father was a Polish citizen and Poland was under Communism. There were some Jews, but many more non Jewish people from Fiume, our home town, and the Istria region of Italy and from Eastern Europe, then all under communism. In Bagnoli, the organizations ran an enormous complex of several buildings, one of which was the processing center, where the refugees were housed. The place was originally built to house orphaned children, then taken over during the Mussolini period by the fascist party to be used for events run by the Gioventu' Italiana del Littorio (GIL), the fascist youth organization. It was occupied by the allied forces in 1944 and later, and until 1951, used to house refugees being processed for emigration.

For about a week we stayed in a rooming house while the initial paperwork was being prepared, then went back to Treviso to pack up everything and leave for good. I remember a funny thing: while Judy and I were walking from the rooming house to the camp, some people on the street stopped to ask us if we were from Spain, because our fiumano dialect sounded Spanish to them….!! and we were in Italy!!!

If I recall correctly we left Treviso for Bagnoli sometime in August. Father made all the arrangements for our personal belongings to be packed and shipped, while all the furniture was left in the apartment for the Lager family to dispose of.

In Bagnoli all three of us we were housed in one of the big buildings: the living quarters consisted of partitioned spaces in what were originally humongous rooms. The partitions were made of framed wood particle boards that were about 8 feet high, so that you could hear everything that went on. There must have been at least 50 or more people in each large room; toilet and bathing facilities were outside and quite a walk from these big rooms. Each of these partitioned rooms housed one family, men, women and children all together. At night the snoring was a real concert! You can surely understand why Judy and I got up and ran out as early as possible and went back as late as possible.

The stay in such luxurious surroundings was not free: those young and able had to do some work. Judy and I were assigned to a room where potatoes were peeled (I mean tons of potatoes) or fruit cleaned; of course we always were in the company of people in the same position as ours so there was a lot of kidding and laughing, that is if other Italians were there, and luckily we had to work just a few hours a day.

The rest of the time was spent in tedious long hours waiting to be interviewed, alone or as a family, by innumerable different persons, speaking Italian or English with interpreters, undergoing I cannot recall how many medical tests to make sure we were not bringing some disease to the country we were aspiring to become a citizen of. The experience is now unimaginable, but I recall only one instance when we were given a container to give a urine sample, then had to go to a room where dozens of other women were doing the same and I could not accomplish the endeavor: I had to go back three times to finally give the required sample (I wish I had that problem now!!!).

However, there was also time to roam around, relax outdoors and explore the grounds, meet other people, especially Italians. A funny thing happened, among the families there, we encountered the family of Nereo, who, as a young man, was the stock clerk and errand boy in my mother's store in Fiume in 1940. He was there with wife and children, planning to emigrate either to Canada or Australia.

We befriended many other families, encouraged by the fact that we all took our meals, refectory style, in large rooms set aside for the purpose in a couple of the buildings. I also managed to have my first crush and my first kiss by a young man there; we had a good time, which lasted only a couple of weeks because he (Vittorio Rubesa) was emigrating to Canada. We also, with Judy along, managed to go to the local beach a few times.

In rethinking of that time, I must admit that it was not all bad: we managed to laugh, sing and be together with people who were in the same situation as ours.

The stay in Bagnoli was pleasantly interrupted for Judy and me when father decided to let us take a train to Bari to say goodbye to Aunt Tilde, Uncle Martino, cousin Caty ,the very young

Marsha and little Franco. We spent about a week in Bari, enjoying the family, the beach and the delicious pizza on the beach.

Bremen, Germany

Around the middle of September 1951, all the documentation having been completed, we were told to pack up our things and be prepared to leave for Bremen, Germany by train and then, from Bremerhaven by boat to New York.

So, again, we were facing the unknown, leaving a place that for several weeks we had known as home and also leaving some of our newfound friends, but especially, leaving Italy.

Early one morning we were transported by bus to the railroad station in Naples, from where we boarded a special train, refugees only, for Bremen. It was the most fun Judy and I had in our young years: all the Italian speaking single young men and women, about a dozen, got together in one of the compartments where we spent the day and the whole night singing old mountain and folk songs, telling jokes and laughing a lot. I know that food was served and there must have been beer also, which encouraged the noise we were making.

Father came looking for us, asking that we join him and sleep some, but we refused and I believe that even the people seated in the nearby compartments, did not complain about the noise, but enjoyed seeing young people having fun.

We arrived in Bremen mid-day the following day and, again by bus, were transported to the refugee camp there: It was a much nicer and neater camp, small buildings where Judy and I shared a regular room with walls and a door, and father a separate room, cleaner and neater bathing facilities, everything in a much smaller scale than Bagnoli. There were no interviews or medical exams, so our gang of Italians spent part of the days playing ball games outdoor or seated in the local canteen, singing and laughing (aided by local beer), giving a show for the much quieter Eastern Europeans who apparently enjoyed the fun even without understanding our language. I seem to remember that even the locals appreciated our good spirit.

In the evening, we could get passes to leave the camp and visit the local beer hall where we spent the time again drinking good beer and listening to local music. One such evening of fun was interrupted by our father, who followed us and ordered us back to the camp with harsh words for us as well as for our young friends with whom we were only having clean fun. We were all young, I was not yet 18, going toward a new life in a new country whose language we did not even speak; I believe we were just saying goodbye to the old and preparing for the new.

At the beginning of October we were told that our ship would sail on October 8th and some of the older young people, who were qualified to do supervisory work on board, were transported to Bremerhaven and boarded the ship the day before, while the rest of the group followed on the following day.

S/S General Hersey

We boarded this military transport ship in the morning and were directed to our quarters by U.S. military personnel: Women and children on some decks and men on different decks, so father was assigned, of course, to a men's deck. There were no beds with mattresses, only pull-down cots with heavy canvas, each row with three cots one on top of the other, no linens, only blankets. There were only overhead lights which were turned off at night when only safety lights remained on at the exits.

Judy and I were lucky enough to pick a row only for ourselves, so that we were able to use the third cot for the few personal belongings we had along. We were given towels and shown the toilets and bathing facilities: very clean and modern, but no privacy, so women and screaming children had to take care of their needs and shower in public.

That first night we did not sleep much, prevented not only by the uncomfortable sleeping arrangements, but also by the crying of children, snoring of older women and the rolling of the ship. Also some of the women did not take very well to life on a ship and many were seasick often.

On the following nights we managed to sleep some, but avoided the "below deck" uncomfortable arrangements by staying up late every night and getting up very early in the morning to stay on the upper deck, outdoors when the weather permitted; we never went below during the day.

On the first morning on board, we were told that we had to do some work every day and Judy and I were assigned to cleaning the bathrooms, but after a couple of days, due to the intervention of an older Italian woman who was like a forelady, we were taken off the bathroom detail and assigned to the children's dining room, which in fact was the officers' mess hall. We had to bring the food to the children, clean up after they were finished, but in the end we got to eat sitting comfortably instead of standing in the enlisted men's mess hall. We had breakfast in this mess hall where, beside holding on to the tray sliding on the metal tables as the ship rolled, we discovered American breakfast foods (eggs, ham, bacon, potatoes, bread and butter, juice): Judy and I always liked food and I can tell you that we put on at least five pounds during a 10 day trip. We followed the advice of the troops: keep solids in your stomach and you will not be seasick, which proved correct for us.

Unfortunately father was seasick during the entire trip and did not follow our suggestion that he not stay in bed, below deck, but come up in the fresh air and eat. We hardly saw him during the entire trip if you discount one evening when he saw us standing at the rail of the deck with some boys' arms around our shoulders. There were lots of people around and he started screaming as if we had been doing who knows what forbidden act. He managed to embarrass us by saying that "he wanted to deliver us pure to Aunt Bertha." You can understand from this how little he understood that we knew right from wrong and that, after several years in boarding schools, with nuns, we were taught what was proper and what was not. Unfortunately, even later on, he often managed to embarrass us by treating us as if we were the children he was forced to leave during the war.

Strange as it may sound, those 10 days at sea were some of the happiest and most fun days of our lives.

One of the young men in our group had a guitar, which helped, and we entertained ourselves as well as all the other passengers day and night. I guess we must have been pretty good because members of the crew also came out, when off duty, to listen to us and applaud.

Although we had very rough seas for several days during which we were forced by the crew to stay indoors, we still managed to have a good time with our friends. I guess, at that age, we did not worry about what the future might bring us; also we knew that we had lots of family, cousins and aunts, in New York and that we would not have to face our new life alone like some of the friends we travelled with who eventually decided to go back to Italy .

. . . . .

The ship arrived in New York in late afternoon of October 18th and moored in the harbor overnight and we, of course, did not know why. We stayed on deck with our friends most of the night admiring the lights of New York, we could see well 17 Battery Place (where I worked for some time later on) and all of lower Manhattan and could not believe how many tall buildings, all lit up, there were.

In the morning the ship docked at Ellis Island, we found out only later that there was a longshoremen strike in effect, therefore, no personnel was available on the Manhattan piers, but federal employees were made available on the island, which at that time was no longer used to process immigrants.

We disembarked holding on to our personal belongings; our trunks were then unloaded and we were asked to stand by them and wait to be called and processed by U.S. Customs, all in alphabetical order, therefore, we were among the last. I do not know how many people were on board, but we spent the whole day in that humongous room, grateful for the Welcome Wagon and other charitable organizations that were dispensing free food and drinks (that is where we discovered hot dogs!) and witnessed, on several occasions the problems some people were having because they were trying to smuggle in undeclared valuables.

Finally, in late afternoon we were ferried from Ellis Island to the Battery where we were met by cousin Bandi and Aunt Bertha who probably had been waiting there a long time. It was night time already so we did not see much on the way by car to the Bronx where Uncle Morris, Joan and Aunt Dora were waiting. I am not sure whether any of the other cousins were there, but I believe Magda and Nerina were there too.

You will find it hard to believe what the sleeping arrangements were for the first few days: Aunt Bertha had arranged for father to have a room at an upstairs neighbor, but the room we were to have in the apartment was still occupied by the tenant (who only came at night to sleep there). Aunt Dora had her small room, but in the master bedroom Judy and I slept with Aunt Bertha in the large bed, while Uncle Morris slept on a sofa in the same room!! The snoring was unbelievable and I can tell you that we slept very little those first few days.

Finally the tenant moved out and Judy and I had our own beds in our own room, where Aunt Bertha gave us also a small table radio to be able to enjoy the music we liked.

The Bronx

Our new life was not easy at the beginning: first of all there was the language problem. While we had studied some English in Italy, it was nowhere enough to carry a conversation or to understand when people talked to us. Luckily Aunt Bertha and Aunt Dora spoke Italian so, at least at home, we could be understood and understand.

During our first week-end in New York, Al and Magda came to see us and they took us downtown for our first view, from the street, of the Empire State Building and our first lunch at the Automat: maybe you can understand our amazement at the sight of all those small glass doors from where food came out after you inserted coins. We walked around for a while with our heads up in the air, discovering the big buildings, then Al gave us a brief tour of the downtown area. The following weekend Uncle Morris took Father, Judy and I to see a show at Radio City Music Hall where he must have had some pleasure in watching us marvel at the magic of the spectacle on that enormous stage.

At home we did get adjusted to the American way of life, especially to the fact that the main meal was in the evening instead of midday.

The main problem was how to learn English fast and Bandi came up with the solution. He felt that the best way for us to learn the language quickly was to be enrolled in High School (Judy was only 16, so she would have to go to school and I was 17 and a half); he felt that it did not matter what grade we were assigned to, since spending the day among young people speaking English would definitely be helpful; we would get used to the sound of the language, while spending time with people our own age. So Bandi accompanied us to Roosevelt High School in the East Bronx where we were enrolled at the Junior level, with courses mostly in English.

Bandi got us bus passes so every morning we took the bus from Macombs Road in the West Bronx to East 172nd Street and back home in the afternoon when Uncle Morris gave us money (55 cents!!!) to go see whatever picture was playing at the Mt. Eden Theater, insisting that getting used to the sound was the best way to learn the language. Bandi also decided to give us a good start in our new life by opening a bank account, with $20.00, for each of us, and explained to us the importance of saving.

We sat in the classes, mostly speechless, answering only in monosyllables the curious questions of the other students. What we found most disconcerting was the system itself: in Italy we sat in our classroom and at the end of each period, the professor for one subject left and the professor for the next subject came in: the interval between periods was just a few minutes.

In New York we were really horrified at the sight of the entire school running up and downstairs to change classrooms: It sounded like the charge of the light cavalry, not only the sound of hundreds of young people running, but also everybody talking loudly, laughing and kidding, the commotion continuing in the next classroom until the teacher arrived. We managed to pick up a few words here and there from the students and the teachers tried their best to help us and we were able to understand what was going on in the class.

With the help of a student who spoke only an Italian dialect, we were interviewed by counselors who had to review the subjects we studied in Italy and then assign us to the proper courses. While Judy must have found her place because she remained in school, became a member of Arista within only a few months, learned to speak English with much less of an accent than I did and graduated with honors in 1953, I became disenchanted within a couple of weeks.

The way that English was taught in my class was the way Italian was taught to me in Italy in 4th grade; the counselor found it hard to believe that in Italy I had studied, among other subjects, Latin, Greek, Math, French, Chemistry, Physics, Philosophy; she thought I was stating incorrectly this last subject and only when I listed some of the philosophers I studied, did she believe me.

I, therefore, informed Bandi that I was leaving school and was going to find a job; I promised him and myself that I would learn English quickly; I sat at a table every day with the book I had brought from Italy and within a few weeks I had learned enough, memorized all the verbs, so much so that I went out and purchased my first English Book: Arch of Triumph by Eric Marie Remarque. It was the first of many books I read when I found a small bookstore downtown where I could purchase out of print books for less than one dollar. I remember buying every book by Steinbeck and Hemingway that I could find there.

But I have to go back a couple of weeks: after I left school, with the help of Uncle Morris and his Jewish newspaper, I found a job, my first job, at a small factory, on 37th St. and Broadway, that manufactured artificial flowers, all made by hand. So I took the subway to 34th St. (10 cents each way !!!) and made fabric flowers all week, bringing home the enormous gross amount of $27.00 (the minimum wage was then 75 cents an hour). I gave Aunt Bertha $15.00 a week for room and board and could also buy Judy a lipstick or a trinket once in a while.

During lunch break I wandered through the main floor of Macy's (escalators were a new discovery!) and marveled at the enormity of the place. Since I had not gotten used yet to eating only a sandwich for lunch, I would go and buy me another one, usually the cheapest one, for 35 or 40 cents. I also indulged my sweet tooth at Macy's.

As soon as I could speak English enough Uncle Morris preoccupied himself with finding young men for me to date; he did find several, all children of friends, so I had my first date in November of 1951 and was then invited to my first New Year's Eve party, at the house of friends of my date. So I experienced for the first time how young Americans celebrate holidays: in basements decorated for the occasion, loud music (while the rest of the family put up with it upstairs), food and drink. I was very flattered by the other young people there who could not stop marveling at how well I spoke English after only a couple of months in the U.S. It did a lot for my ego and it encouraged me for the future.

When I took the job at the flower factory I was not aware that it was only temporary during the Christmas season, so I found myself unemployed at the end of December.

At that time cousin Ella owned a fancy millinery shop, Ella Hats, on East 56th Street, and she offered me a job, thinking mainly that I would learn English faster by spending all day with English speaking people; also she felt that, perhaps, if I was good with my hands, I could take over the shop when she decided to retire. I was good with needle and thread, but fashion was not my cup of tea and I was forced to hear her instructions only in English (she refused to speak Italian with me), to answer the phone so that I would overcome my "phonophobia" (at home I

would answer the phone with “Pronto”!), to get her lunch from the pharmacy across the street, where I would be forced to ask for food and drink in English.

By March 1952, thanks to Ella, I was confident that my English was good enough and decided to seek my fortune outside the family. I saw an ad in the newspaper for office help in Long Island City at a coffee packing factory, so I took a chance and went for an interview. It turned out that they were looking for someone with bookkeeping experience, which I did not have, but they offered me a job in the factory, packing coffee and tea: I accepted the job at a weekly salary of $31.00.

It was not nice work, standing all day by a noisy machine (and there were several on the floor) packing coffee cans in cardboard boxes. Small talk during coffee breaks and lunch with other women who considered that work their careers so that I could not explain how for me that was only the first step toward more rewarding work and an easier life. I had to join the Union because that was the law there and for about a month, during iced tea season, I had to take the day shift packing tea bags (the Union did not allow women to take the night shift) which started at 6AM which meant that I had to leave the house shortly after 5AM. I remember that when I took a bath each night, coffee dust floated on the water while I soaked away my tired feet.

Weekends I was going out quite a bit (Uncle Morris had many friends with sons around my age!) and Aunt Bertha was always very nice about allowing me to come home very late; she believed that young people should have fun and enjoy life and she obviously trusted me.

A Jewish family from Argentina, with two young sisters about our age, Toni and Mia, had moved into an apartment upstairs from us and we became very good friends with them. Their father was strictly Orthodox (their mother had died and an aunt lived with them), therefore they were not allowed out until after the Sabbath. They were pretty and loved to dance and they taught us all the Latin American dances. Judy and I often went out with them to places where we could dance and meet boys and we always had a good time. Unfortunately, after they both married and had children, we lost touch with them.

During this time I decided to join B’nai B’rith and, after attending several meetings at their place on 57th Street, together with some other girls, we decided to form our own chapter that met once a week at an old synagogue in the East Bronx. But, considering the distance we had to travel, our Uncle Morris helped us get permission from his congregation to meet at the small synagogue frequented by my family just across the street from our apartment on Macombs Road. I really do not remember the topics that were discussed, but I do remember that all the girls were curious about our background and I was asked to tell our story to girls who did not seem to know what really happened to Jews during the war. This endeavor did not last long and the Chapter was disbanded.

In June 1952 I decided that I spoke English well enough to attempt to obtain a job in an office where perhaps I could also utilize my knowledge of Italian and French. I saw an ad in the NY Times for office help at American Express and decided to go for an interview thinking that an international company might need people who spoke foreign languages. After waiting for my turn a very long time and filling out innumerable application forms I got to speak with a person who hired me. Unfortunately I was not hired because of my language skills, but for a tedious job of sorting out cancelled traveler’s checks in an office which was not located downtown on Broadway, but on Hudson Street, an area that at that time was strictly industrial (no nice walks during lunch break!). I was working in a very large room with at least 50 other girls, seated at a

desk, no talking during work hours, a brief break in the mornings and afternoons, a longer break for lunch.

It felt like being in school again since the supervisor sat in the front, under a clock, and everything was regulated by a bell. The work was boring, but, after a few weeks, I was promoted to a different section where the work was a little more interesting, but still boring. The only positive thing derived from this job was that I really learned to speak English well which gave me more confidence to socialize with the girls I worked with. One of the girls introduced me to her brother; I dated him for a few months, we got engaged, planned to marry, but the relationship ended a few months later when I felt that he was not the right man for me.

By December 1952 I felt that I wanted to look for a better job: English was no longer a problem and I also enrolled in a business school to learn typing and shorthand (the things I did not want to learn in Italy!) to improve my opportunities. So I quit American Express and, always through the NY Times, found a job at Cole Steel, manufacturers of steel office furniture. At that time the "help wanted" ads consisted of an entire section of the NY Times. I used a very methodical system: I cut out the ads that interested me, laid them out systematically by address, starting uptown on the West side of Manhattan, going down then cross town to the East Side and uptown again. I walked most of the time (I could do it then!!!), and it took me most of the day.

I got the job, at $35.00 a week, working in the inventory department where we kept stock records and furnished the salespersons with availability of all items, as needed. I lost my "Phonophobia" since I had to use the phone a lot and learned how to use the comptomer (does anyone remember this manual calculator? I do not believe it exists anymore). I became very proficient at it and I was faster than the other girls because I figured out how to use less key strokes by adding mentally some numbers as I was using the machine. I was employed at Cole Steel at the beginning of December and, at Christmas time, I was amazed when I received a Xmas bonus of $20.00. After a couple of months my salary was increased to $38.00 per week.

Every day, after work I would walk to the business school, which was just a couple of blocks away on 42nd Street and, when I finished the course, I was typing at 80 words per minute (on a manual typewriter!!)

While working at Cole Steel, I became very friendly with an older co-worker, Frances Goldstein, who introduced me to her young daughter Sandy, with whom I became very friendly and with whom both Judy and I socialized a lot.

They had a summer home on Lake Hopatcong, in New Jersey and we visited there very often. Sandy also introduced me to a nearby "singles" resort, The Lakeview Country Club, where I enjoyed many weekends. It was a very modest primitive facility, right on the lake, frequented only by young Jewish singles; there was a main house and several cottages which some girls rented for the entire season. It was nothing like what we think of a "country club", very inexpensive, but very lively. Days were spent swimming in the lake, rowing and just relaxing. Nights were always very noisy, lots of music, dancing until late hours and not much sleeping.

At the end of the summer, cousin Bandi felt that I was ready to learn a little more about business so he offered me a job at his company which I took (at $45.00 per week) and where I remained until March 1954. The job was a true learning experience where I also acquired the confidence necessary to work and deal with people. Bandi was a very good teacher.

There is one fun thing that I must mentioned: during a conversation with Bandi and Joan, the subject of music came up and, when Joan found out that I had played the piano in Italy, she mentioned that she had an old accordion and that maybe I would be interested in exploring its study. I did, got Joan's old accordion, found a teacher who came to the apartment for lessons every week (very reasonable then!) and started making music again. Much fun!

In March 1954 a friend of Uncle Morris, Mr. Hausefader, approached me and suggested that I go up to Albany and take a job at his son's company. The son, about my age, had just split with a girlfriend the father did not like much; so the father was trying to make a match.

I went to Albany, took the job at $50.00 a week, but the son, while very handsome, was a nut case who tried to commit suicide and was on drugs and shock therapy. I lived in a pensione for a while, very depressing and lonely: I ate all my meals in a nearby restaurant, but did not like it.

Fortunately there was a very nice Jewish Center where I met a lot of nice young people. I also found a furnished room with use of the kitchen and the rest of the apartment; the Jewish landlady was a very nice person who also introduced me to other members of her family who lived in the same building. So I had a nice social life while I also learned a lot about business. Most weekends were spent on excursions to nearby lakes and during evenings there were lots of dances and social activities at the Center.

While in Albany, Judy and father visited me once: father had bought an old Hudson car and they drove up; It must have been an ordeal for Judy who was the guide and navigator, but we had a chance to spend a weekend together, although they had to sleep at the Y since there was no room for them in the apartment.

But at the end of July I really missed Judy and the rest of the family so I quit and returned to New York and to Aunt Bertha's apartment, but we really wanted our independence and it was difficult while living in someone else's house. Judy, who now had a decent job at Metropolitan Life, was especially fed up, so we started thinking about moving out on our own.

Having acquired enough experience and good command of the English language, I chose to go to the Bi-Lingual Employment Agency and let them do the leg work to find me a job. I received a call from them the same day and was told that the prospective employer wanted to see me immediately. So, on a hot August day, I took the Jerome Ave. subway and from Mount Eden Ave. went down to Battery Place to meet the person in charge at an Italian importing company. I was hired immediately by MIny Corporation at $55.00 a week and started work the very next day. I guess I must have done a good job because by December 1954 I was making $95.00 a week.

Before December 1954 Judy had an argument with Aunt Bertha so she moved out and was living in a furnished room in Washington Heights; we both started looking for an apartment of our own, we found a small one bedroom apartment in Washington Heights, at 217 Haven Ave., overlooking the Hudson River. We moved in with furniture donated by Aunt Bertha and by a friend of cousin Ella.

We started enjoying life (the most enjoyable thing we did the first several weeks was taking a shower late in the evening, since this was a forbidden thing in Aunt Bertha's place!). We purchased a TV and loved staying up late, even watching the Late Show, and the Late Late Show until early morning hours. We loved having dinners by the windows watching the sun set over the Hudson River and New Jersey, cooking whatever we felt like eating. In those days,

however, we were always on a diet to lose weight, so in our refrigerator you could only find frozen meat, frozen vegetables, salads, fresh fruit, juice and milk for our morning cereals; no “noshes”. Our “bar” consisted of one bottle of “4Roses”, for medicinal purposes!!
Our friend Sandy Goldstein and her family lived just a couple of blocks from our apartment, so we spent a lot of time together, in our place or hers. We had lots of parties, made a lot of new friends and dated quite a bit. Judy was now taking voice lessons and I was continuing with my accordion lessons, after purchasing a brand new accordion, at a music school nearby: music has always been our life’s passion.

At our friend Sandy’s house we were introduced to our first real Thanksgiving dinner and it became our very favorite holiday, perhaps because it is a real American holiday, without any religious connotation. Thanksgiving was not celebrated in Aunt Bertha’s house.

By now, Judy too had a new, very nice job with Amit Corp., an insurance broker whose titular head was Fred Cohen, from Trieste, who had found refuge in New York at the beginning of the war. His two sons were also members of the firm and it is particularly because of one of his sons, Fred Chambers, that Judy and I were then able to obtain the good jobs we held for most of our working life. He was the best reference one could have; he would tell prospective employers that the mold we came from was broken after we came out of it. Most of Amit’s clients were companies headed by other Italian Jews who were able to escape the war and start new businesses in New York.

In 1956, while awaiting our citizenship papers, therefore not yet able to vote, both Judy and I actively campaigned for Stevenson: it was an enlightening experience and our first taste of what life in America was really like. We had the opportunity to meet and speak with all different kind of people and to understand how the political system in this country works. We both loved it, although, considering that, beside our work, we also had so many extracurricular activities, we did not get much sleep.

In 1957, while working at Miny Corp., I was able to take my first real and long vacation in Mexico: instructed by cousin Ella who had been there, I spent a whole month, the first couple of weeks with my friend Sandy, visiting all the tourist attractions, enjoying the new experience, while acquiring a taste for the Spanish language, so much so that, on my return to New York I enrolled at the New School for Spanish courses. I joined the school’s Cosmopolitan Club where a lot of the students, many like me, foreign born, met for fun, music, as well as intellectual exchanges.

So now I had a full time job, a busy social life, I was enjoying studying Spanish, I was taking accordion lessons, when I decided that Russian was the language to learn, therefore, I also enrolled for courses at NYU, but gave this last up after a semester. My life was full without it.

Judy, while working at Amit, continued her voice studies by enrolling at the Music School of the Henry Street Settlement where she became friendly with many of the other students and where she also performed in several operas that were produced by the school. Judy eventually joined the Mannes School of Music where I, together with family and friends, enjoyed her singing for many years.

Our life in New York

By now, both Judy and I had jobs we enjoyed, had a busy social life, some time separate from each other, and especially enjoyed visiting all our cousins on weekends. By now Nerina, Magda and Bandi had children so the family had grown. We often had parties at our apartment and could finally say that we were both happy and no longer missed Italy so much. We had become assimilated, English had become our mother language and we spoke Italian only when, in public, we did not want other people to understand what we were talking about.

We also spoke Italian when we visited Bandi and Joan and we sang all the old Italian songs accompanied by Bandi's guitar or ukulele; we laughed a lot and were very happy. Music was always an important part of our life, whether old pop songs or now classical music and opera.

After moving to Brooklyn in 1958, in an apartment vacated by Nerina's parents who had returned to Italy, we moved back to Manhattan in 1962, when we found the commute to our jobs too long, but especially too long for our dates to take us back home after enjoying an evening out on the town.

So we moved to East 77th Street and discovered what life in New York was really all about. We made new friends and discovered new places to visit; we really began participating in the life of New York because we finally lived in it. We became really New Yorkers and took advantage of all the city had to offer. We lived in the same apartment, to the amazement of all the tenants, until I moved to East Hampton in 2008.

I did not speak of East Hampton before, but, for the record, Judy and I started visiting the town in 1967 when a girlfriend, also born in Fiume, told us that the "single" life was there. So we started spending weekends here occasionally, then in 1972 and 1973 we rented a cottage for the summer. Finally in 1973, instigated by friends, we bought the house I now live in.

Unfortunately Judy is no longer with me: we were planning to retire in East Hampton when Judy reached age 65: she did not make it and, after she bravely fought cancer for two and a half years, I said good bye to her on October 18, 1999, exactly 48 years after we arrived here, when she was only 64.

The reason that this is "our" story and not my story is because, short of 4 months in 1954, we lived our entire life together, through thick and thin, in good times and bad times. Some time we fought like cats and dogs, as most siblings do, but we never stopped caring for each other; any arguments we had always ended with a hug and a kiss. It has been 17 years and I miss her every day. She is in my heart, in my thoughts and, very often, in my dreams.

In conclusion, I must admit now that our father was right when, in 1951, after we told him that we really did not want to come to NY, he tried to convince us that life in the USA would be better for us. We were not happy to leave Italy, but eventually we did find our life in New York, a happy life, even without husbands and children of our own, a fact that we accepted and never considered a problem.

I realize now that I never mentioned our father, and that is, perhaps, because, during our formative years, not by his choice, he was not with us. It is also because, after the war and the loss of our mother, he was never the same man he was before the war; evidently, while Judy

and I were able to accept the loss and continue our life, he was never able to adjust to his new life and he became a bitter man who was not even able to show his love for us, and I know he loved us, but was just incapable of showing it in a way that any other father would.

So, in New York, he lived his own life, started a small business in the Bronx which he had to abandon after a few years when he hurt his hand, eventually moved to an apartment not far from us in Manhattan, but, while we kept in contact, we saw him very seldom: we had nothing in common, so there was nothing to talk about, especially since he never had anything positive to say about anybody or anything, only complaints. He was not well during the last few years of his life and passed away in 1973 at age 77.