

# From the Fruits of War: The Artistic Garden of Eric Finzi

By Eugene L. Meyer

**R**uth Gruber, an indefatigable photo-journalist instrumental in rescuing 982 Italian Jews from the Holocaust, was 90 when Eric Finzi, the American-born son and grandson of two of them, approached her at a reunion of survivors and their offspring.

“I thanked her,” recalls Finzi, there with his wife and two grown children. “I realized my children existed only because of her. To realize one person could make such a difference! I told her I exist only because of you. She just smiled. She said, ‘It was my pleasure to shepherd all these wonderful people across the ocean to America.’”

The Finzi name is perhaps better known linked to its Contini relatives, as in “The Garden of the Finzi-Continis,” the acclaimed Academy Award-winning 1970 Vittorio De Sica film, based on a historical novel, that captured the plight of affluent and educated Italian Jews as the Fascist vice was tightening. The story Eric Finzi tells resembles their plight, but in his real-life version there is an escape and a happy ending. Ferrara, a city in northern Italy whose Jewish population dates back to the 13th century, is Eric Finzi’s ancestral home and the setting for the film.

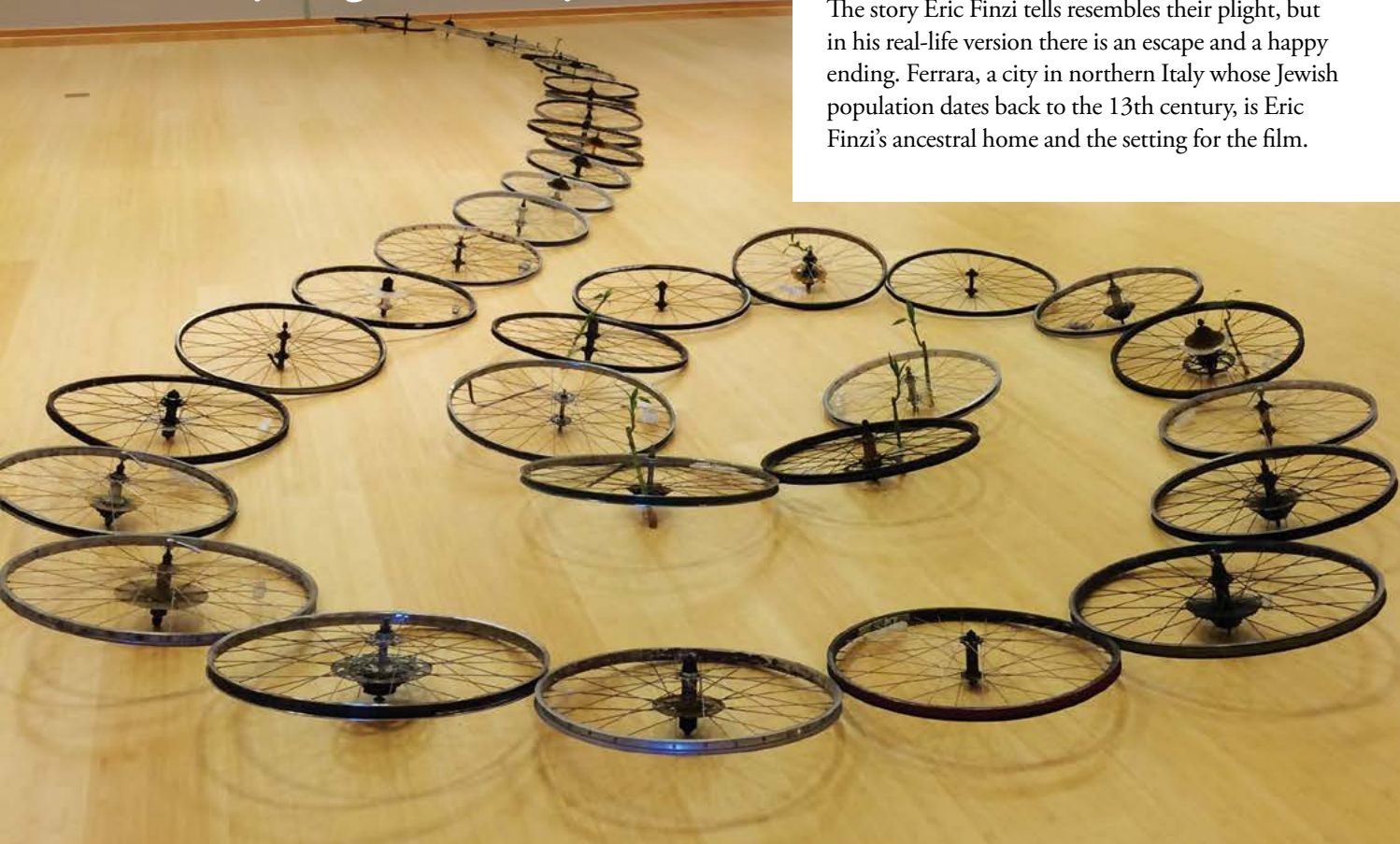


Photo credit: photo by Steve Arbury, courtesy of Radford University Art Museum

Finzi’s art has been illustrated in numerous articles and has been seen online and at museums and galleries in the United States and Europe. “Trail,” was installed at Radford University Art Museum in Radford, Va. during a 2015 solo exhibit that included his epoxy paintings inspired by the cinematic masterpiece “The Garden of the Finzi-Continis.”



Photo credit: Photo by Mark Gulezian courtesy of Eric Finzi

In Eric Finzi's 2014 assemblage, "Tennicyle," the ghostly glass racket symbolizes the fragile world of the fictional tennis-playing Finzi-Continis, while the wheel-less bicycle rims evoke the drama of his real family's perilous wartime escape, which nearly ended in tragedy. This artwork was featured in a show devoted to the theme of inherited memory at The Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco during 2016-17.

A renaissance man who has pursued dual careers in medicine and art, Finzi, 65, is especially indebted to Gruber, a determined, diminutive woman who, while working for the U.S. Interior Department, convinced the government to transport Jewish Italians on the troop ship SS Henry Gibbins, from Naples to

the Port of New York in July 1944.

It would not have happened were it not also for his grandmother, Nechama (Nelly) Alkolay Finzi, who, when the opportunity arose and with limited options, chose to save her son Alfons over her husband David. It was, her grandson says, a "Sophie's Choice," and the rescue has inspired much of his art—encompassing paintings and sculptural objects—displayed in galleries from Radford, Virginia to New York, Chicago and San Francisco to Ferrara.

One of his paintings at the 2003 New York show, the first to feature the refugees, was of a young woman, from a photograph taken on the ship coming over. "Somehow, she'd now grown up and was now an older woman," Finzi says, "and she bought the painting."

#### **A Unique Mission**

The transatlantic transport was a unique mission. It was the only one the U.S. government undertook to

rescue imperiled European Jews despite resistance from powerful anti-Semites in the State Department.

Once their ship landed, on Aug. 3, 1944, the refugees traveled by train to Fort Ontario, a deactivated army base in Oswego, New York, on Lake Ontario, where they were interned behind a barbed wire-topped fence. They were to be sent back to Europe when the war ended, but thanks again to Gruber's insistence, they were allowed to remain. But first they had to briefly cross into Canada and reenter the United States in Niagara Falls, New York. The Finzis crossed the border on Feb. 2, 1946. Alfons, Eric Finzi's father, was then 21. His passport was waived, he was registered and fingerprinted and indicated he "intends to become a U.S. citizen." Nelly indicated likewise.

So, Alfons Finzi stayed, resettled in New York City, married in 1950, became a plastics manufacturer and amateur inventor, and raised two children—Eric, and his sister, Rima.

The family's journey had begun in Vienna, where Eric's grandfather, David Finzi, had a business and where his father, Alfons, was born. The family lived there from at least 1925 to 1937, when Eric's father was 12.

"My father described a relatively happy childhood in Vienna," Eric Finzi said. "His mother was active socially in Viennese society. My father was raised primarily by a French governess when he was very young. His parents spoke Ladino at home when they wanted private conversations. They had a privi-



Photo courtesy of Eric Finzi

Finzi's parents, Hilda and Alfons Finzi, on their wedding day in 1950.



Photo credit: courtesy of Eric Finzi

Eric Finzi is a doctor and artist who creates works in a wide range of media.

leged lifestyle for sure. They just never dreamed anyone would come after them because they were so assimilated.”

They left as anti-Semitism increased, leading up to Germany’s annexation of Austria in March 1938.

David Finzi and his family survived by moving from city to city and country to country, first to Belgrade, Yugoslavia, then to Skopje, Macedonia. David was imprisoned in Ferrara and asked Nelly to use family jewels and cash to bribe the guard to release him. Their older son, Miko, trying to free his girlfriend in Nazi-occupied Croatia, had disappeared and was presumed dead, and she wasn’t about to lose her surviving son, Alfons, too. “She thought, ‘I’m going to need this to keep us alive,’” Eric Finzi says.

So, she said no to her husband. Eventually, he escaped, walked to Bulgaria, joined the partisans fighting the Nazis and immigrated to Argentina. As a Sephardic Jew who spoke Ladino, closely related to Spanish, he could assimilate. Husband and wife never spoke again.

### Surviving by Stealth

By 1943, Nelly and her son Alfons were living on rations with forged papers saying they were Italian Catholic refugees in Attigliano, a small village guarded by just one German soldier. Alfons had a girlfriend there but never told her he was Jewish and wouldn’t have intimate rela-



Photo credit: en.wikipedia.org

When American photojournalist Ruth Gruber (seen in a 2007 photograph) learned of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s intent to grant safe haven to nearly 1,000 European refugees at Fort Ontario in Oswego, N.Y. in 1944, she volunteered to escort them on their sea voyage from Italy to the United States. Gruber died at the age of 105 in 2016.

tions for fear she would find out.

Looking for an escape route, he walked 50 miles in four days to Rome, liberated from the Germans on June 4, 1944. There he sought out the head of the Jewish community who knew his family. The man had a friend who arranged for Alfons and Nelly to board the U.S. troop ship. With little time to spare, Alfons returned to the village and secured two bicycles for them.

Halfway to Naples, the bicycles had flats. Alfons and his mother proceeded on foot until American GIs in a Jeep offered them a lift. Eric Finzi would use bicycle tires in his art because, he said, “For me the bikes became symbolic of refugees trying to flee. For the show in Ferrara, I collected 1,000 bicycle tires and rims to create sculptures and based a lot of paintings on bicycles.”

The fleeing Italian Jews—many of them affluent, educated professionals—shared the ship with an equal number of wounded American servicemen. Eric Finzi’s father, who already knew several languages, studied English with a dictionary and tried to converse with the soldiers. He asked one what he’d done before the war. “I was a bum,” the man replied. Alfons looked that up in his German-British English dictionary. The definition he found was a person’s behind.

Arriving in New York, the refugees boarded trains to Oswego, where they were held at the former army base. Eventually, Alfons was permitted to attend Oswego High School, from which he

graduated. The internees were released before the camp closed in February 1946.

Eric Finzi’s father found a home and a new life in Queens, where Eric attended public schools, skipped two grades, then entered the University of Pennsylvania at age 16, bringing with him his artwork and tools. He studied science and medicine, hoping to do biomedical research. Instead, he became a dermatologist, which he describes as “highly visual and hands-on, and plays to one of my strengths, visual recognition, and doing something with my hands, which I loved about painting and pottery and ceramics.”

Finzi’s father, Alfons, became an American citizen in 1951, but the war haunted him. The family never spoke Italian at home, and Alfons Finzi seldom spoke of the past.

“His coping strategy was not talking about it,” Eric Finzi says. “And he’d never get emotional. He’d just suppress the emotions because it was just too painful to think about. His uncle and cousins all got killed in concentration camps. It was only when I was a teenager and a young adult that, upon repetitive questioning, the story would slowly come out, a little bit at a time. His mother never recovered psychologically from all of her losses and never really adapted to her new life.” Nelly died in May 1987, Alfons on Nov. 16, 1993.

### A Surprising Encounter

Gruber died Nov. 17, 2016, at the age of 105. Shortly after, the rabbi at her son’s synagogue, Adat Shalom, in Bethesda, Maryland, asked if any-

one wanted to speak about a recently deceased loved one. Her son, David Michaels, rose. Eric Finzi was four seats away. “He said his mother was Ruth Gruber. I couldn’t believe it,” Finzi recalls. “It was a very emotional time when he stood up and talked about his mother dying.”

Michaels remembers that Finzi leaned over and said, “We have to talk.”

“Then,” Finzi says, “I went over and thanked him profusely for his mother enabling my existence. It was a most amazing coincidence.”

It wasn’t the first time one of Ruth Gruber’s Jewish Italian families had approached Michaels, a high-ranking public health official during the Clinton and Obama administrations, so he and Finzi had an immediate but not

unprecedented connection.

In New York, Michaels said, the refugees and their children were frequent visitors to his childhood home. “They were in and out of the house. We called them my Oswego family when I was growing up.”

And with that accidental meeting in the Bethesda synagogue, Eric Finzi joined the family. ☑

## B’nai B’rith and Fort Ontario

**M**onths before the Aug. 5, 1944, reopening of Fort Ontario—the Oswego, New York, Army barracks refitted as an internment camp for the mostly Jewish refugees arriving from Italy—the State Department reached out to B’nai B’rith, whose members in Upstate New York volunteered to assist officials in attending to the inmates’ many needs.

Local B’nai B’rith leader Jack Cohen recruited lodges in Rochester and Syracuse to collect bedding and children’s winter clothes, solicit arts and crafts materials and sports equipment donations, and order special food for the High Holidays. A synagogue and several common rooms and recreational spaces located inside the confines of the camp were also furnished by B’nai B’rith. Men from the lodges befriended many of the inmates, who viewed them as a source of emotional support and as a link to the outside world.

A mix of young families and older people, 918 out of 982 Fort Ontario residents were Jewish, most of whom had been in hiding or were concentration camp prisoners. Nine men were B’nai B’rith members.

Many of the men, women and children living behind Fort Ontario’s barbed wire were experiencing trau-

matic stress, exacerbated by spartan conditions and the subzero cold of Oswego, where snow fell from October to May. Nonetheless, they optimized their situation, writing a newsletter in three languages, performing music recitals, exhibiting their art and developing relationships with the locals. Some participated in a 1944 Christmas radio broadcast from the camp; their grateful thanks buoyed a war-weary nation.

Knowing little English at the start, teenagers attending Oswego High School graduated at the top of their class. Twenty-three births and 13 deaths occurred during the camp’s operation.

Although the refugees had pledged to return to their nations after the war ended, a successful publicity and letter-writing campaign, supported by B’nai B’rith, achieved the desired results: President Truman allowed 900 inmates to apply for citizenship when Fort Ontario closed in February 1946.

**B. B. SERVICE OF THE MONTH**

**SERVE REFUGEES**

WHEN 902 refugees, saved from Nazi concentration camps and death chambers, trudged gladsome America's best free port (pictured above), they discovered that magnificent strange needs had been made for their racial and religious brethren—by B'nai B'rith.

And attention is paid to them, because they are here for the duration of Fort Ontario to support New York State. Among them is a former leader of B'nai B'rith in Argentina, Dr. RABBI MAGNAN, a prominent physician.

Of the 902 inmates, 812 are from various European lands, including 700 who were in the hands of the Government when it was necessary to create this special service. At the request of the U. S. Department of the Interior, the B'nai B'rith had furnished them since their arrival in this country. 1944; special books for all continents, a calendar and other articles. The following special presents were of great help for Dr. RABBI MAGNAN, whose executive order mark America's first "free port" possible.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP MADE THIS GREAT HUMANITARIAN SERVICE POSSIBLE

THE NATIONAL JEWISH MONTHLY

In 1944, B’nai B’rith Magazine, then called The National Jewish Monthly, published a notice about the organization’s work improving life for the European war refugees housed at Fort Ontario, a former Army Camp in Oswego, N.Y.

A living memorial to Fort Ontario, the exhibits and interactive website of Oswego’s Safe Haven Museum contain extensive information about those who began their new lives in the camp. ☑

-- Cheryl Kempler