

Interview with Faye Porter
By David Zarkin
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Jewish Community Relations Council, Anti-Defamation League
of Minnesota and the Dakotas

HOLOCAUST ORAL HISTORY TAPING PROJECT

- Q: This is an interview with Faye Porter on March 25, 1984, at the home of Mrs. Porter's daughter, Bella Smith, in St. Louis Park, MN. Mrs. Porter, please tell me your complete name, including your Jewish name, if it is different.
- A: My complete name is Faye Porter and in Jewish it's Faige Porter.
- Q: When were you born?
- A: 1910.
- Q: In what town and country were you born?
- A: It's in Poland. Valina, Valina gubernia.
- Q: Was that town ever known by any other name?
- A: This little town, the name was Gorodok. Just a little town where I was born.
- Q: And what were your parents' names, grandparents' or great-grandparents?
- A: Great-grandparents' names were Shlomo Zingerman and Elka Zingerman, and then my father's name is Nachum Merrin. My mother's name is Bella Merrin.
- Q: And where were they born?
- A: They were born the same -- Valina. My mother was born in Coet and my father was born in Gorodok.
- Q: And what were your parents' occupations?
- A: My father was a teacher.
- Q: What languages were spoken in your home?
- A: Yiddish.

- Q: Was your family secular or religious in practice or orientation?
- A: Religious.
- Q: Were they observant?
- A: Observant.
- Q: Were they religious Zionists or Hasidic?
- A: Hasidic more.
- Q: Did you receive any formal Jewish education?
- A: Yes. Yiddish, a little Hebrew.
- Q: Okay. What events, either local, national or international, were you aware of from the mid-1930s to 1941?
- A: I can tell you from 1939, when the Polish army was destroyed from the Russians. This was exactly out of Yom Kippur. The Russians want to catch up with the Polish army, and the Polish army settled in our town to rest. The Russians sent out leaflets to surrender, and they didn't give up, the Polacks, so they sent over 25 airplanes, over Gorodok, and they start throwing fire bombs, and they destroyed all the houses, and the Polish army. So we're left without a home! So we have to move out from this town to Mukacevo, and there we stayed with Soviets till the Germans came. The Germans came in 1941. The first year, 1941, they gathered all the men and they said they're taking them to work. And they prepared pits, graves, and they killed them.
- Q: How did you receive information of these events?
- A: From Ukrainian people, because they took the Ukrainians to help them do this.
- Q: Did you have any contact with gentiles during this time?
- A: Yes.
- Q: In what kind of setting?
- A: We had contact, because my husband hears that they're gonna take men to work. So he'll flee.
- Q: He fled?

- A: Yes, he fled to Gorodok, where we lived before. And then he took me over. The gentiles, they drew up a petition that he can stay.
- Q: How did you come in contact with non-Jewish people? Was it in the home or in business?
- A: My husband was a shoemaker. He worked for them free. That's why they let him stay. Otherwise they wouldn't let him stay.
- Q: Were these the Polish that let him stay?
- A: The Ukrainians. This was a town, all Ukraine.
- Q: Were you aware of any anti-Semitism around you, or as it may have affected other Jews in your community?
- A: There was a lot. Ukraine, there was good people and bad people. Police, especially, was bad, because the Germans, they promised them to help establish a Ukraine country. That's why they helped the Nazis to kill the Jews. And a lot of them, before, they were anti-Semites. A lot. Where we have lived for all our years in this town, and it happened. Murder! It happened, like all over, murders for money.
- Q: Jewish business people were murdered? Was that it?
- A: Yes, Jewish business people were murdered. For money. From the Ukraine.
- Q: did your relatives live outside of your community?
- A: Yes. They lived in other town, in Mukacevo.
- Q: To your knowledge, what happened to them?
- A: The same what's happened to everybody. In 1941, it was a blitzkrieg, so the Russians ran further back. So some young people, they run with them, a lot of people, and they survived in Russia. A few cousins of mine survived, because they went then to Russia.
- Q: Then what happened after you left your home town?
- A: We stayed in Mukacevo till they gathered us into a ghetto.
- Q: Where was the ghetto?
- A: In Mukacevo.

Q: In about what year was that?

A: That was in 1941.

Q: And what was life like in the ghetto?

A: In the ghetto was a miserable life. You cannot go out too far in the city. You cannot walk on the sidewalk. We wore Mogen Davids from the beginning, a white Mogen David on our arm. Then, after a while, they put yellow patches, small yellow patches, in the front and in the back. And our houses, eight inches, patches on every Jew's house. To recognize. My brother went out once, was walking on the sidewalk. They took him to the police station, beat him up terrible. The shochetim, they're not allowed. You know what a shochet is? What makes the beef kosher? So we just have to leave it. Eat vegetable, bread. And it was not allowed to go out, to buy by the Ukraine. We suffer hunger. The only thing, my husband was out of the city, like I told you, and he used to send food over to me, and I helped others with this.

Q: And what were you doing then in the ghetto? What was your day like in the ghetto?

A: Nothing. I had my parents, I had my sisters, my brothers, my whole family, back together.

Q: What was the reaction of the other people in the Jewish community?

A: The reaction was sad, very sad. We knew that something is hanging over our heads, and we couldn't help it. My sister was living in a small Ukrainian town. The Nazis came and they took my brother-in-law, and they pull him to a wagon and they drag him all the ways till he fell dead. And the children, they got so scared. The one boy, he got so sick, stomach, so I sent. Some doctor says to go out and find -- you know what piafkes is? It's like little snakes, blood suckers, and a policeman caught me. He says, "Where are you going? To the partisans?" I says, "No, I want to save my sister's boy." I'm carrying these blood suckers. But it didn't help, so after a while, they called the doctor, and the doctor gave him an injection, a milk injection, and he got well.

Q: Were there discussions about fleeing or staying in the ghetto?

A: There was very little. We weren't organized, you know. That was the trouble.. The last minute, the last two weeks before, some people fled. And there was a forest man, and he took them in. Whatever Jew came to him, he saved them.

Q: What actions did the German forces take in the early months or years of the occupation?

- A: What action? I'll tell you what! They asked for gold, silver, fur coats. Even the metal, all kinds of metal, they took. They ask contributions, and work, work. My husband worked -- it was summertime -- haystacks, hay to pack in stacks. So he asked that Nazi, "What are you going to do if is a good worker?" He says, "he best Jew will be the last one."
- Q: Can you recall any specific anti-Jewish measures or legislation by the occupation? By the Nazis, or the Ukrainians, or the Poles, against the Jews during this time?
- A: That's what I told you. It was not allowed to shecht, slaughter. And not too much to observe. Like my husband went on Shabbos to shul, and one of the Communists says, "Puchtick?" My husband's name was Puchtick, not Porter; we changed it in America.
- Q: What was your knowledge of the outside world, other ghettos, mass killings or concentration camps, during this time?
- A: We knew what was going on in Poland. A lot of Polish Jews came over from Poland, and they told us. Just, we didn't believe it! We knew something is going on. You live in fear. But we didn't believe what's gonna happen. The main thing, we weren't organized. Was no leader to organize, to do something. Everyone, if he fled, he fled by himself, like, not knowing where you go, and what you're gonna do.
- Q: So how long were you in the ghetto?
- A: Months. They didn't keep us too long in the ghetto. They were afraid. This was the last of 1942, so they chased us out from one ghetto to the other ghetto, and we knew that this is the last of our life. It was on a Friday afternoon. They put us in the middle of the street, and they count, and they chase us in a different street to be all together, because they gathered all the Jews together. Was more women than men, because the men they killed right in the first year when they came. And then on Shabbos morning, they took everybody (whispering) to the graves.
- Q: And then what became of you, after they took the other people to the graves? Where did you go then?
- A: I went with them, together. A cousin of mine was living in this street, so I said to my sister, let's go and see this cousin, what they are doing. Maybe we can do something. And I said to the people, "Let's burn the houses and run!" I said, "Let's burn the houses, and when it's a fire, maybe they cannot kill everybody. Let's run into the forest." Nobody listened to me, so I went out with my sister. Then we met a policeman, and she said, "No, I'm afraid to go." She went back to the house, and I went into this cousin's house. Nobody was there. So I don't know what to do. I see a barn, an open barn, was standing near this house.

Q: Was this in the ghetto or outside the ghetto?

A: The ghetto. So I went into this house, and this was already on Friday night. And I sit in a corner. And I saw, in the morning, that my cousin went out from some place. She went into the house to take some water, and she went back. So I saw her going back to this special place, and I was sitting all day Saturday in this barn, and the Nazis and police coming in, and out, in and out. And they didn't see me sitting. Late, after, I went out, and I went to this place, and I called -- her name was Pessel -- and I said, "Pessel, this is Feiga!" And she answered. This was early Sunday morning, maybe about three o'clock in the morning. I climb up under the partition, and we decided to go down. It was quiet already. We climbed down, crawled maybe about two blocks, on our hands and knees. We went into the forest, and we came to this Polack, and he took us in, in this forest. We stay a couple weeks...

Q: Out in the woods?

A: Just in the woods. Just like that. Without food. We used to go out at night and pick potatoes from the fields and bake them outside. And after a while, they find out there is Jews in this area, so Nazis came, and police, and they want to surround us. So we flee, and they didn't catch us. After a while, I find out that my husband is alive. Three boys came to find out what's happened, maybe somebody is alive in their families. So they took me, and they brought me over to my husband. My husband was already with partisans, Jewish partisans.

Q: Where was he located?

A: He was in the same area, in the woods. About 30, 40 miles farther. A Ukraine person gave him a rifle, 150 bullets, and two grenades. So they kissed the grenades and his rifle, when they saw it -- this commander, this group. He was all ready. This commander, Krug, he was a Communist, so he was afraid to stay. But he went to Kiev, and from Kiev they send him back to his town, and say, "You go back and you have to organize underground people to fight against the Nazis." So he organized.

Q: Who told him that, the Communists?

A: The Communist leaders in Kiev.

Q: Kiev is in Russia?

A: Kiev was Russia. So he came, and he started organizing the nearest to him, to his town. He started organizing the Jewish people. And then after a while, the Russian army left. They had to go to the forest! And they started fighting against the Nazis, with bombs. They made bombs, into the rail tracks, put in bombs to

destroy the trains, the Germans. And electricity they destroyed. And then when they were stronger, the partisans, they went on to police stations -- destroyed.

Q: And what were you doing all this time when they'd leave?

A: Me? I was a cook. I was cooking for the partisans. (Shows photo in book) See, here is this Polack. He saved a lot of Jews in his forest. This is Slovik.

Q: Cassimir Slovik. And this is from a book entitled, Jewish Partisans: A Documentary of Jewish Resistance in the Soviet Union During World War II, Volume Two. And it's compiled and edited by Jack Nusan Porter.

A: This is my son. Jack Nusan Porter is my son.

Q: And it's published by the University press of America. So what was your husband doing?

A: My husband was going every night on duty, like I told you, on police stations, with a group.

Q: Blowing up police stations?

A: Blowing them up. Bridges blown up. Electricity destroyed. And laying mines under the tracks. Things like that. In winter we used to sew white robes, they shouldn't recognize.

Q: Do you remember any events? Do particular events stand out in your mind during this time?

A: Events? 1942, the Nazis in the Ukraine, they came to our forest, and they wanted to destroy us. We had a connection with Ukraine, and they let us know, so we moved out into a different forest. In 1943, they did the same thing. We have to move out, to a different place. And then, I'll tell you, when the front was going farther and farther -- near Moscow -- their leader, Nacerkev, he was an anti-Semite, a nationalist, he wanted to destroy the Jewish people. So he sent away our commander, Krug, on a duty, and he wanted to undermine our camp and destroy us. His Adjutant came over secretly and he told us what is going on so we should keep our guard double, and not to sleep, and to be awake. So in a couple days, what's happened, is that our commander has to stay one day in a different group of partisans, and that day a lot of Germans came and wanted to destroy them. They didn't know where to go, so he brought 'em over. On the third day, he brought all this group, partisans, to us.

Q: Were these Jewish people?

- A: The Jewish and non-Jewish. Was a mix of Jewish and non-Jews. So it's happened, a miracle. He couldn't do anything, that leader, that Nacerkev. You understand?
- Q: You better explain it to me. Was it because there was non-Jewish people in there, and he didn't want them?
- A: There was non--Jewish people, but most of it, Krug's group, was Jewish, Jewish people. That's why. He wanted to kill all the Jewish, and to be free of the Jews. He was an anti-Semite, a nationalist. But you know what happened? He sent over a different leader, and they wiped him out. They killed him.
- Q: They killed this anti-Semite?
- A: Yes.
- Q: So then how did things go for you after they sent in the new leader?
- A: It was better. Was much better.
- Q: Any other events that you can remember that the partisans were involved in during this time? Can you remember any specific things that they blew up? Any places?
- A: Sure. I remember they blew up these police stations.
- Q: Any of the villages, you remember they were in, or anything like that?
- A: And some villages, they knew they are against the Jews. When the Germans came in, they gave permission for three days to rob the Jews, the houses. They cleaned up everything! And so we knew what that kind of people did to us. The partisans went to those people, "We need clothes. We need food." So we took from those people clothes, food. And some of them they killed, too.
- Q: During the time you were with the partisans, were you getting any news about how the war was going?
- A: Yes. They used to come from the headquarters and let us know what ours do in the war. So many tanks destroyed, and where they are, and what they're doing. All was through the radio, and headquarters, from the partisans, they let us know the news. Oh, yes. We knew. And in 1943, they send by planes ammunition and clothes for our forces, the Russians. I went with my husband to see exactly. By parachute they threw down. They made three or five clusters of fire, they should know where we are, where to throw. That was the sign, you know, to let 'em know where, exactly which place, where to drop it. So they dropped ammunition and clothes.

- Q: This must have been quite a boost to the morale of the partisans.
- A: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. This was.
- Q: Did this allow you to do some things that you hadn't been able to do before, in terms of resistance, fighting, with the new supplies?
- A: I don't think that it was able to do so, because the war was going on, and it was too hard to deliver. Just one time they delivered these packages.
- Q: When did you become convinced that the war was kind of coming to an end? Do you remember that?
- A: Well, I'll tell you. This was in spring, 1944. They let us know. (Sighs) It was so sad. We cry, and we kiss each other. We didn't believe it. Before, we were afraid maybe the Russians will go through our forest, their whole Army will run through the forest, not the main streets. But they didn't. And when we find out that we are free, we didn't believe it. We cry and say, "Where are we going? And what are we going to find?" I knew that all my family was destroyed, four sisters, and four brothers, my parents, their children. My parents, they had already 16 grandchildren.
- Q: Was there any discussion about going to Palestine?
- A: That time was impossible. After the war, when we came out, we decided only to go to Palestine. We didn't think to go to America. Nowhere else, only to Palestine. And the Zionist organization was working so hard, to organize people to go underground to go into Palestine. And it was not so easy.
- Q: Why was that?
- A: Because they didn't give certificate. And to go from Russia was not so easy. Was still under occupation, Nazi's occupation, until 1945, you know. When we were already out of the forest and we are living near Rovno, my husband could make out partisans' passport for some people to travel.
- Q: He made those himself?
- A: Yes. It was a partisan group, so you could make out those passports to give to people. Like example; From Munkatch, two people, they were working for the Nazis -- you know, workers -- so they came to Rovno, and my husband arranged for them work. One was a sefer, one was a watchman. And after a while -- Munkatch is in Czechoslovakia -- they gave them partisans' passport, and they could travel home.

- Q: Did you and your husband get these passports, or not?
- A: My husband could make it. It was our office, our office and the Russians together.
- Q: Was he working in the office?
- A: No, my husband was working in an office where you took raw fur, raw skin. The Ukraine used to bring the raw skin, and he gave them letter, exchange. They bring over raw skin -- you know, from their cattle -- and he gave them ready-made skin for boots.
- Q: And what were you doing then, during this time?
- A: I was pregnant, and I had my baby. That's in 1944. We had him in Rovno, still under the German bombs for the nine months I was pregnant, and we had to go out of the city for nine months to hide against the Nazi bombs, because they were bombing every night the city.
- Q: Who was occupying the city at the time, though?
- A: The Russians were occupying.
- Q: Was there any anti-Semitism during that time?
- A: There was not too much. Not too much.
- Q: Was there much of a Jewish community left there in Rovno?
- A: Not much. You can count ten, 15 families, maybe 20 families.
- Q: And did the families get together and talk about the future? What they wanted to do? What were the discussions?
- A: The discussion was to be organized, and to go to Palestine. The Russians gathered all the orphans -- children, Jewish and non-Jewish -- and they want to send them away to Russia to schools. So we find out that some of the children are Jewish, so every family took those children into their families. We took two children, a boy and a girl. The boy was 14 years old, the girl was 10 years old. We took them in like our own children, and we kept them until we went out from Russia. And we bring 'em over to Katowice, Germany. That was on the border, Katowice. And there the Brichah, the Zionist organization, they worked very good. They organized all the children and they put them into a kibbutz, and from there they sent them away to Israel. Now they are in Israel. I visit them. I have even pictures taken with them. They are just like my children, to me.

- Q: Was there any discussion at this time about you and your husband and other members of the Jewish community going to Israel?
- A: Yes. Was organization and discussions -- secretly -- because if the Russians would find out that we are talking about Palestine, they didn't like it. So we used to make a party, make-believe, an engagement party or a wedding, and discuss about those things, to organize, and where to go, and what to do.
- Q: And how long did that go on, that you met?
- A: That went on for months. For a year. We came in beginning of 1944, and then we left in the middle of 1945. A year and a half.
- Q: Were there any organizations, Jewish or otherwise, that helped you get out of Russia?
- A: Just the Zionist organization, secretly to go out. We were Polish citizens; for us was easy to go out from Russia. Just to travel from one country to the other country, was not so easy.
- Q: Why was that?
- A: The Polacks, they didn't want to let us out, when we came to Poland. We had to make a passport, like we are coming as Greeks, coming from a concentration camp. And the Brichah made out passports, false papers to go to Greece.
- Q: When did you go to Greece?
- A: We didn't go to Greece! No, no. We came out from Katowice, with those passports, and we went to Poland, and then in Poland, we had to go to Cherchen, in Czechoslovakia, and to go farther and farther to come to Italy. But we didn't go to Italy, we settled in Austria, at Bindermichel D.P. camp.
- Q: How did you find out about that camp?
- A: This is all through the Zionist organization. They worked on this. This is brilliant boys, young boys. They organized, they led us, and we went through. We have to walk for miles by foot through those zones --Russian zones, Polish zones. So we settled in Bindermichel, Austria, near Linz. And from there we were planning to go to Israel. Accidentally, my husband's brother in Chicago, he found out that we are alive.
- Q: How did he find out, do you know?
- A: I find out there was a Jewish working -- he was an interpreter --+ working with the Russians and with the Americans. So he met my husband in Bindermichel,

and he looks like Russian. And he says, in Russian, "Kudavar?" "From where are you?" My husband, he says, "I am from 'there' and 'there.'" And he asked him if he has somebody in America. He says, "I have a brother in America. He's in Chicago. It's just I'm planning to go to Palestine, not to America." He says, "Well, don't you want to let your brother know that you are alive?" My husband says, "Yes, I would love to." He says, "Give me your name, and I'll put it in Forward."

Q: The newspaper.

A: A newspaper in New York. He said, "I'm going next week to New York. Give me your name, and give me your brother's name, and I'll put this in the newspaper, and he'll find out."

Q: At that time, was The Forward typically running names of people who had survived the Holocaust in Europe?

A: In New York! So this man, when he came to New York, he put us in, that note in that newspaper. And in a few weeks, they send over a lot of papers to our camp. So we find out that my husband's brother knew already that we are alive, and he sent us right away papers to fill out to come to America. And he sent a letter: "Any time you want to go to Palestine, you go from America to Palestine." That's the way -- through the HIAS -- we came to America.

Q: And how did your husband's brother get to America?

A: He came in 1913. Before the First World War.

Q: So where did you come to in America?

A: We came to Chicago, to my husband's brother. We stayed there for a short time. We couldn't find a flat to live. My husband couldn't find work. So we visited Milwaukee, our relatives. And there my husband found work, and we found a place to live in a mixed schvartze-weitze (black and white) neighborhood, and we settled. My husband started working, very hard.

Q: So, do you maintain contact with the Jewish community then in Milwaukee?

A: Oh, yes.

Q: And do you maintain contact with other survivors, or any survivor organizations?

A: Yes, yes. We have a New American Club. And now we have young, second-generation survivors, active. Once my son came to speak for them about the partisans, to be organized. And, too, to talk about it, to let children -- their children -- know what it was, what we went through. My husband, he used to tell

my children, especially Jack. He likes to know everything. That's why he was interested, to write and to publish those books, especially about Jewish partisans.

Q: Was Jack born in this country?

A: Jack was born in Russia, in Rovno. He was a baby. That's why we couldn't go to Palestine -- with a small baby. That was the only reason. Otherwise we could go to Israel.

Q: Did you ever get to Israel?

A: Twice I was in Israel. I was in Israel when my daughter was in a kibbutz, working in Kibbutz Saad, a religious kibbutz. I went there to visit her. And I went this year. In November I was in Israel, to visit my relatives. Just it was not pleasant. I was in a car accident.

Q: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. Can you tell me what it has meant to you to be a survivor of the Holocaust?

A: It's meant to me very sad. Sometimes I'm thinking that I'm not normal, because I am only one, the survivor, and I am alive. The only thing what I'm thinking is that I believe in God. That's kept me alive. And I live for my children, for this generation. And I tried to teach my children that they should go in a Jewish way, an orthodox way. I sent my one son to a yeshiva when he was 14 years old. My daughter went to Chicago to a yeshiva school, high school. This is my life. This is most important. They should go in a Jewish way, and teach their children. This is my happiness.

Q: I can understand that. Yes. If you can, after your experience during the Holocaust, please describe to me your general feelings about human nature, non-Jews and Germans.

A: I don't trust them. No, I don't trust them. When my oldest son used to go out, he'd come home, and he says once, "Mom, I met a girl, and she wants to be megiaar." You know, convert.

Q: Convert to Judaism?

A: Convert to Judaism. I said, "You better not, because I don't trust nobody." I don't know, maybe some are good people. The whole world is not bad. Just I, myself, I don't trust anymore. Is it wrong? What do you think?

Q: I can't say, you know, because I haven't had the experiences that you have had.

A: Yes. I don't trust. Especially Germans, Polacks, I don't trust. And we see, even in America, some, they're getting married, and after a while, because the husband

is Jewish, and she's not Jewish, the husband wants to teach the children Jewishness, and she's against! And they get divorced, or the unhappy life they have, and their children mixed up. That's why I don't trust. You born a Jew, stay Jewish. You born a Christian, stay a Christian. I love people, believe me. I love people! No different, a Jew, a non-Jew. Just intermarriage, I don't trust.

Q: Have you had a chance to see any of the movies or television programs, or read any of the books about the Holocaust? Do you think that they accurately tell the story of the Holocaust?

A: Oh, sure. They do. Even if some people, they're denying, on the TV, it's true.

Q: Would you be willing to share with us any photos, mementos, or other things, for the purpose of exhibition or research from the period of the Holocaust?

A: Photos?

Q: Yes, did you have any photos from the resistance, or...?

A: I have just in these books on the partisans.

Q: And were those from your husband's, or your, collections? From those years?

A: This is some my son collected. He collected those, all pictures.

Q: So there's two volumes, and it's called Jewish Partisans, and it's by Porter, and it's from the University Press of America. The latest copyright date on this book, Jewish Partisans is 1982, and copyrighted by Jack Nusan Porter.

Can you think of any other comments, then, that you wanted to add, about your years in the partisans, that we should add onto this tape?

A: What kind of comments? No other comments. It was a lot, you know. So far, I don't remember.