

INTERVIEW WITH FLORENCE TABRYS

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POTOMAC, MARYLAND

Mrs. Tabrys, can you please tell me your name, your name during the war, your date of birth, your place of birth and then anything you can about your childhood, about your family, about your town where you grew up, where you went to school and all those kind of things.

My name is Florence Tabrys now, by my marriage and I was born in Szydlowiec, Poland, on May 8, 1925 and we was a family of seven children. I had three brothers, four sisters. We lived together with mein grandparents in this one house and I went to school in the day and mein brothers went to school and we had a nice life before the war broke out. It was very nice, we wasn't rich, we was poor people. My father was a shoemaker and my brothers helped out and I was the oldest from the girls and I helped also in the household with my mother and we was very happy. We went to Hebrew school, we went to school and I had a lot of friends and we was surrounded with family, we went to each others house. We didn't have to call nobody. We just walked in and my parents was very, very religious, my grandparents...we had to go to temple on saturday and on the holidays. And my brothers had to go to temple on these occasions and then until the Germans came in, in 1939 and stopped everything.

Did you speak Yiddish at home?

Yes, Yiddish.

Can you tell me what you were called in Europe? What was your name?

Faiga

And what was your family name?

Schwarzfink. My maiden name was Schwarzfink.

Is there anyway that you can describe to me what it looked like in Szydlowiec, Poland (side A)?

It was a small town but it was very nice and it was a nice, good relationship with friends, we used to sing and laugh and always be happy with our families and um..I used to belong to an organization called the Bund.

Oh, your....?

Yeah.

Were there all different organizations?

Yes. There was like Hashomer Hatzair, there were all different kinds. So I belonged to the Bund. That was right before the war broke out. It didn't last too long.

Now the Bund was not Zionist, was it?

No.

Did your family have any...

They didn't know about it.

Oh, they didn't know that you were involved in it?

No, but you know, as we got older, we wanted to break out and do different things and belong to something and have fun and enjoy ourselves and get together there and that is what we did.

I don't remember if my parents knew, I think they knew about my brothers belonging, I don't know whether they knew about me. So, my brothers took me in also, so I should enjoy myself a little bit. Like at home, Saturdays, we was very religious and you couldn't do anything. Over there, you was like free, you could do whatever you pleased. So that didn't last too long. Then, the war broke out.

But you had finished school then?

No. Not completely.

You hadn't?

No. I didn't have a chance.

So, you were still in public school.

Yes.

What about other schools?

I went to Hebrew school. To Cheder, and then I had a tutor coming into the house to teach me Polish and Yiddish too, yeah. And then for a while I was doing this. My sister was doing the same thing and my brothers had finished school and then it stopped. As soon as the Germans came in - it stopped. Everything.

Before we get to that point in 1939, what I am sort of looking for and asking what it looked like - were there trees, were there...

Oh, it was beautiful. Lakes and trees and how do you say it, mein grandparents used to own an orchards.

Oh, for what...

And we used to go for the Summer. It was beautiful.

For what crops?

Fruit.

Oh.

We used to eat the fruits from the trees. It was very nice.

So there was a forest near there?

There was a forest, we used to walk there and it was very, very nice shtetl.

So it was kind of rural?

Yes.

Did you have electricity in your house.

No - Yes. I remember when we put in the electricity. That was not too long before the war broke out.

Did you have running water?

No. No water, no toilet in the house and we was seven kids. How we did it, I don't know. I still don't know to this day, I keep on explaining this to my children today. Because if they complain, I tell them that they have three bedrooms and they sometimes say that it is not enough so I explain this to them all the time. We didn't have that. Friday, every friday, we - everybody - my mother used to boil water on the stove and everybody was washing their hair and put - how do you call it? Kerosene - shmeie ph079 in their hair, because we had lice - even before the war - we had lice. Because we lived so together. You know, two kids in one bed. It wasn't like here - every child had a room separate with a bed and was completely a different life - but we didn't know any better and we was happy. We was happy, we was with our parents, sisters and brothers and families, you went with this friend, you went to the other grandparents and uncles and cousins - we was a big family. So, you thought that this was the best way how to live.

What about your grandfather? You told me that a little bit about your grandfather.

Mein grandparents lived with us, we lived in the same house - my mother's parents.

What were their names?

Mein grandfather's name was Yitzkak.

What was his family name?

Fishman. And mein grandmother's name was Gitel and they was beautiful people.

And you think that they were born in that Shtetl?

I think so, yes. They were born there. And they were beautiful

people. The two of them was born in the same night. I remember they always told that story - the two of them was born the same night and a midwife - you know they didn't go to a hospital, like here - a midwife came to the house and they said - let's say, I don't remember who was born first, mein grandmother or mein grandfather, but the midwife said, you going to be like a pair, you going to be married and that is how it happened.

A shidduch?

Yes a shidduch. So the two of them was always telling this story, they both was 85 years old. Mein grandmother died during the war. She laid down in bed, and she always used to pray I don't want to be sick, I would like to lay down and die. She lay down, stopped talking and it took like three days and she died. I remember like it was now. My grandfather survived and he went with my parents in 1942, he went - that's what they say, he went to Treblinka.

You told me that he was a tailor?

He was a tailor.

And do you know how many brothers and sisters he had?

No.

I don't remember that.

But they were a religious family?

Oh, very religious. Very. He had a beard. If I sent you the picture - up to here. Yeah, like a Rabbi.

Do you know about his education? Did he go to school?

I have no idea. He knew Yiddish, that is for sure. He knew good Yiddish and davened and my parents too. Yeah.

What about your parents. What were their names?

My parents ... my mother's name was Hinda, my older daughter is

after her. She was beautiful - (starts to cry) now I am going to start crying. My mother was a devoted mother, she was very beautiful. As much as I can remember, she was a very good person and very devoted to everybody and so was my father. A very hard working person, he was a shoe maker, he worked in the house.

Do you know about their education? Did they go to school?

Yes. They were educated. They went to school and everything.

Was it a Polish school?

Polish and Jewish. They knew both. As far as I can remember.

Do you know when they got married?

They got married, I think, right after the first war, I think 1920 or something about that time, they got married.

They were both from Szydlowiec?

They were both born in Szydlowiec. They had my older brother and then the second, I was the third one. And they loved me very much, because they had two boys and I was the third one - a little girl. I remember that they really appreciate me. And then they had four more after me. We were seven kids. It wasn't easy. Always, my mother was cleaning and cooking and baking and doing things, everything for the family.

Did you help her a lot?

I helped a lot because I was the oldest girl. When she had the younger kids, I had to help out a lot.

Did the older brothers help a lot.

The older brothers helped too.

It was beautiful.

You told me that you have a picture of your eldest brother.

I have a picture of my eldest brother, yeah.

What was his name?

His name was Yona Chiel ph 145.

And do you know what year he was born?

In Szydlowiec.

No, what year?

What year? I don't remember the year exactly but I know that we was like two years - every two years she had another child, my mother. I am 1925, she had him right after she got married.

So he was born in like 1921?

Something like that.

And he had the same schooling situation as you? He had the cheder and than...

Yeah, yeah sure.

O.k. Then he would have been finished with school by the time the war started.

He was finished and he was working with my father.

So he was trained as a shoe maker?

Yeah. That is how it went in Europe. What the father did, the son did.

Do you want to then discuss what happened then?

And then it start the war in 1939. I remember like it would be now. We heard talking about the war, but we didn't want to believe it. And then in 1939, the Germans came in and then was completely different. We didn't have really a ghetto, it was certain streets - we wasn't allowed to go there - to walk. And at night, we couldn't

walk. How did they call this? I don't remember how they said this. We couldn't go outside at night.

A curfew?

Curfew, yes. We couldn't walk at night but we was still in our house, it was difficult, we didn't have everything like before. Before, my father and my brothers worked and we had pretty good to eat and everything - we had everything. But after that, when they came in - it was completely different, My father used to make his own shoes and sent them to market to sell. And then he couldn't do that. So, it was a little different.

Were these leather shoes?

Leather shoes. Good homemade shoes. Good shoes. I wish I would have now a pair of shoes like this. So, it was different then when the Germans came in and they used to grab to work. They took my father, he was away like for six weeks - it was very bad when they took him away. We thought we never gone see him and then finally they send him back home and then they used to, like every night, they said - we heard rumors - like, "tonight they are going to grab boys." So everybody was hiding, so they took girls. So it was pretty bad. And then finally, one day, they chased us all out from the house. That was already in 1942.

How did you get food during this three year period?

Haah, it wasn't easy. It was very hard but somehow we ate. I can't remember everything, you know, my father used to work for the Polish people and they used to come in and bring potatoes and some different things and somehow we ate. And he worked but not like before - I said before that he used to work and go to markets and sell in different towns. And when the Germans came in was very difficult. And then one day, they came and they chased us all out from the house. We left everything and we went to this one place and they start picking and they picked me and my younger sister, which the two of us survived and my two older brothers they took. And they separated the boys separate and the girls separate and my parents they send back somehow and my younger sisters and brothers. The very youngest stayed with my grandfather at home, because my grandfather was still alive. And I never, never saw them since that day. We were separated, I - we went to a different camp. We

went to Skarszisko, they called it, in Poland. We walked, as a matter of fact to this place. We worked ammunition there. They called it vitfornya ph 210.

You made ammunition?

We made ammunition. I stayed by two big machines and I made the ammunition and you had to work twelve day shifts for the shells, you poured in the shells like small, and they came out this long. You had -- that was very, very hard. These machines went on soap water. You had to pour in the water - the soap water - you had to pour in the material and you had to check them for sabotage and if you made sabotage they could kill you on the spot. You had to have always material in the machine and I had two machines working like this. Two machines, twelve hours by day and the other week was twelve hours by night - shifts - work shifts. So you slept during the day and you worked at night. And then, every few days, was like selections. You didn't know the next day what is going to be. And we had nothing to eat. We had a slice of bread with a little soup and you have to survive. I was...I was like ninety pounds...'til the liberation we had nothing to eat, nothing to wear, one thing forever we had on and I was sleeping on _____? ph232 - bunks, like nothing to cover yourself, a little hay - nothing.

You said you were with your sister this whole time?

I was with my - that was the only good thing. I was with my sister all over. They used to pick my sister somehow. They always used to pick her, but we didn't know which way - if they pick her for the good or for the bad. And I always used to say that I want to go with my sister so they let me.

She was two years younger than you?

She was two years younger than I am, shorter than I am. She's small. But we was always together. Somehow.

So you managed to stay with her.

Yeah. That was a miracle. Yeah. We stayed together.

So you slept in these barracks....

Big barracks. And we used to come home from the night shift and the barrack was closed and they used to pick out people from the barrack and we saw them and they were shooting them in the woods for no reason at all. And it was terrible, what can I tell you? I was - we was two years in ph249 Scargin in dis Hossock???? working like this, than they sent us to Czenstachow ph 250 and from Czenstachow, they sent - I was in Bergen Belsen.

What year did you arrive in Bergen Belsen?

I think in Bergen Belsen was like '44 because then they shipped us every few weeks in a different place and in Bergen Belsen I don't remember how long I was there, was also terrible. Over there they was burning people. There was the ovens there especially the men was unbelievable. Thin and sick and was selections there too. Every single day was a selection and you didn't know where they were going to take you.

When you were in Skarszisko, did you know about the other camps, about the extermination camps?

Yes. Because the Polish people used to come to work and go home so that's how we knew things.

So they would tell you? So they knew?

They knew. They knew more but we heard rumors, we heard more or less what happened to our parents and to the rest - we heard about Auschwitz and all these things. Yeah, we knew about it. We - I was crying for two years, I couldn't believe what happened and you know, such a big family - with cousins and uncles and you know - your own parents and everything. So - then I was in Bergen Belsen - I don't remember - not too long. Couple of months maybe.

Did you work there?

No - nothing. From Czenstachow ph276 on, we didn't work 'til we was liberated. They had nothing to give us to work. Nothing. They told us to sit down tight and pick the lice.

You didn't have any food.

No, one piece of bread, a little soup and black coffee. And, as a

matter of fact, they used to cut the girls' hair off and me and my sister, we used to share the coffee that we didn't drink - and we used to wash our hair. We was never cut the hair off. We always had the hair. And we tried our best and another thing was very good - because we was sick. Before we went to the camps, at home still, we had the typhus. The whole family had the typhus and we was somehow not sick during the camps, not me and not my sister. And that's how - I don't know how we survived - so from Bergen Belsen we went to Burgau ph290, they send us. Also we were there like six weeks doing nothing, just sitting there and talking about your family, about your home, reminding yourself what you did when it came a holiday and things like that, doing nothing. About food...what we used to cook, what your mother used to give to you. That's all that was on your mind ... and praying to God you should survive and have a piece of bread to eat.

Did you encounter people from other countries?

Oh yeah, yes, from all other.

You did? Not in Skarszisko ph 303?

In Skarszisko?

There were people from other...

Sure - from other towns.

Were there people from other countries?

No. Not from other countries. From around Poland. From other towns. And you met people from Romania - from all over people came. And then we went to another little town - was Turkine ph 309, over there was really, really so bad, we used to live in _____ ph 310 from potatoes, how do you call that? Little like...when you go camping and you have a little...you make yourself a little..to sleep. How you call that? That's how we used to sleep.

(Survivor's husband interjects - Dugouts. Where you keep potatoes.) Yeah, that's how we used to live. Laying on preach ph 315 like that, everybody next to each other. It was really diverse there and we wasn't there too long and then they took us from there - we walked - as a matter of fact to Dauchau (?) ph322 and I was in

Dachau and from Dachau I was liberated. Yeah.

And in all this time you didn't work in any of these places? You were taken and taken and taken?

Taken from one place to the other and doing nothing. Nobody did anything. Yeah. People was dying every minute of the day.

Were there doctors?

No doctors. The people were laying right in front of the barracks where they used to live.

When were you liberated?

I was liberated actually the same time as my husband, in April 30, 1945 by the American army. They came and we was laughing and crying, we thought we saw our parents - we didn't know what to do with ourselves. We were happy - and like I said, we had nobody - we had no family. But we felt like first we was afraid - we were hidden out - we were afraid to come out - and finally we came out and the Americans was there and they were so good to us. As a matter of fact, they was too good, they start cooking and giving us so good food - like too fat things. And the people who ate it, (it was a good thing me and my sister didn't touch that) the people who ate that - they died. It was too much because we was so skinny. Me and my sister couldn't recognize ourselves. That's how we looked like - so skinny and unbelievable. So then the Americans started to give us injections and give us the food and we stayed in these barracks where the Hitler Jungen ph used to stay and then they took us to Felderfinj ph358, and that's when I met my husband. Yeah, over there.

And your sister was with you at Felderfinj?

Yeah. She went to Canada. She was younger than I am, I had met my husband already and she had a chance to go to Canada so she went as... like she has nobody - so she went like as aorphan. She was in Winnipeg in Canada and she met her husband there - he is not alive anymore. And then she came to Chicago. He had family in Chicago. So she came to Chicago.

Was her husband a survivor too?

He was a survivor yeah. He came to visit friends and he met her - they got married and then he brought her to...he had two sisters in Chicago so he brought her to Chicago. We always lived in New York and she lived in Chicago all these years. And then five - six years ago she moved to Florida and he died of cancer, she is alone now. Yeah. We went through hell - what can I tell you? There is so much more to say and to talk, I don't know where to begin.

What can you tell me about the personalities of the people in your family who perished? Like your grandfather and you talked a little bit about your parents. Your brother...can you...

Great, great people. The most wonderful, wonderful people.
(Survivor begins to cry)

Was your brother involved in any youth movements?

He was also in the Bund.

Was he, so was he communist oriented or... socialist?

Communist? No, we was young, we tried to enjoy ourselves, that's all.

Right. Is there anything you can remember about him? Any stories or ...

My brothers? Oh, they were such wonderful boys. Two wonderful brothers. I am not talking already the younger kids, but this was very close - all of us. And they were very good to my parents - helping out and working hard that we should have everything.

They were never bad or anything?

No. No. Really, really good people. Always for the family. They was happy, we wad what to eat and to be together. All of us. That was the main thing. It was a different life then. We was very happy before the war broke out - like I say, we didn't have like what you have hear, but we didn't know any better. We thought this was the way of life and it was good.

Did you ever travel anywhere?

No. The only thing we went was, like I said, with my grandparents who had the orchards and in the summer - we used to go for the summer and it was very, very nice - very good. We walked and we sang and we -- it was very good.

So it was sort of simple....

Simple, nice, good life. Yeah.

How about your grandfather? Do you remember any stories about him?

Oi, my grandfather used to tell a lot of stories, who remembers? He was a great, great person. He used to sit and read - I remember when he used to work still, you know - sit in the house and sew - you know the Goyim - the Polish gentile people - used to come and give him to work. He made those dungarees that you wear here and that's how we had things to eat. They brought stuff to eat - they paid money too. And my uncle's from America - I remember - used to send money. I remember that. That is why I always said I wanted to come to this country. Because I remember them sending letters, I used to read it - and send money. And I always somehow said, I would like to go to America. My husband wanted to go to Israel. I didn't know really where it is going to be better, but a lot of friends of ours went to Israel - and at that time, you know, it was very bad - they went through another war there. They really suffered.

Did they end up leaving or did they stay?

Some of them came back yeah, and one of our good friends, I was with his wife together in all the camps, and four years ago we went to Israel and we met them. We didn't see them for forty years. She used to say she cannot live without me, we was always together. And we used to walk in the concentration camps, like walk to certain places and I was like ph453? and I couldn't walk and she used to drag me. Once she took water from the gutter and she gave me to drink. "Come on", she used to say. I wanted to give up already and she didn't let me. We were very good to her, used to send packages to Israel. She went through lot there too. Yeah.

What did you think of Israel?

Oh, beautiful. Beautiful. And a lot of people don't want to go. We went there, we was three weeks. We went all over. A lot to see. We loved it. We loved every minute of it. We went to...how you call this place, where it's dark...? You've been in Israel, I am sure.

Yad Vashem?

Yad Vashem, yeah. We were at the Massada.

Did you walk up?

Yeah, we walked up. We walked all over. Didn't pass nothing, didn't let go nothing.

That's great. Is there anything that you can add for me that you would like to talk about?

What can I say?

Any incidents or things that happened that you didn't mention?

I wish that my parents would be alive, my brothers, my family - I can't say my grandfather, he was dead at 85 years old. But I had a lot of cousins and brothers and my father had family - brothers and sisters and I wish somebody would be...we tried right after the war and nobody.

Your uncle in America?

My uncles are dead now.

Yes, but they had been...

They were born in Szydlowiec and they came here, I think they run away from the war, the first world war. And then they brought over there wives and their children, I had one cousin - he is not alive no more - he was very, very rich, very nice guy. And they were very nice decent, good people. My grandfather was like - what can I tell you? - like a rabbi here. Unbelievable. Always telling things, I don't remember the things they used to say. I was very good to them, I used to help my grandmother - we lived together.

Did he study Talmud? When he was reading, was he studying the Talmud?

Yeah, Yes. Yes. And Saturday - how do you...read the Torah. I even read, I had to read for my father - every Saturday we had to do this.

I really want to thank you very much.

You are very welcome.

If there is anything you want to add, you can do it at a later time or you can write it down for me.

You could come another time too, it was very, very nice. You are a lovely, lovely, lady. Very nice person, really, I am going to tell this to my daughter.

Thank you very much.

You are very welcome.