

Frieda Portnaya

Frieda Portnaya

Kiev

Ukraine

Interviewer: Zhanna Litinskaya

I was born in Kiev on February 25, 1928.

My grandfather (my mother's father) Yankel Mandemberg lived in the town of Makarov not far from Kiev. He was a rabbi in the synagogue there and was a widower when he married my grandmother, Frieda, after whom I was named. They had a private house in Makarov; it was a good house, built of stone with two floors and eight or nine rooms -- very appropriate for a rabbi. It was surrounded by a garden and fruit trees. My grandfather and grandmother were well-to-do people. On Saturday they had a Ukrainian housemaid to do all the housework, as my grandmother didn't do any work on Saturday. They had a kosher kitchen, with separate utensils and dishes, and strictly observed all kosher food rules. My mother told me that all religious Jews in town used to go to her father. They came on the eve of Judgement Day (Yom Kippur) and he swung a rooster over their heads. That was the ritual of purification on the eve of Yom Kippur.

At Pesach my grandfather conducted a seder in the synagogue. My mother and her brothers always attended it. People did not only go to my grandfather during holidays or to pray. He was a very wise man and people came to ask his advice. He found words of support and consolation for every Jew. He had a good piece of advice for each of them (how to bring up children, how to conduct relations with their wives, how to follow a household budget). He taught his children a lot of things, too. My mother knew all the prayers. Much later, when we were living in Kiev, people she knew from Makarov used to come to see her, and she explained the prayers to them and told them what her father had taught her: how to greet the Sabbath, how to light candles, how to celebrate Pesach and other religious holidays.

Grandfather had four children from his first wife. I knew three of them well -- Rivka, Berl and Pinia. We knew each other before the Second World War. My mother's stepsister Rivka was much older than my mother was, but I don't know when she was born. She was married and her last name was Wainshtein. Her husband died before the war. During the Great Patriotic War her daughters were in the evacuation, but Rivka didn't go with them. She was killed at Babi Yar¹ near Kiev along with thousands of other Jews. The way they put it at that time was that she "left for Babi Yar". My mother's stepbrother Pinia Mandemberg and his wife and son Yakov also perished at Babi Yar. Boria, Berl Mandemberg, was in the evacuation. He came to Kiev after the war and died there some time in 1950.

My grandmother Frieda was my grandfather's second wife. My mother Tsylia Yakovlevna Mandemberg was their first child. She was born in 1897 in Makarov. She had a two brothers, Lyova and Iosif, and a sister, Fiera. Fiera died before the [1917] Revolution. Lyova was born in 1899, and Iosif was born in 1900. Both Lyova and Iosif were laborers, locksmiths at a factory. My grandfather Yankel Mandemberg died in 1912 in Makarov and my grandmother Frieda died in 1916.

My mother loved to sew and wanted to learn this profession. There was a tailor in Makarov and my grandfather arranged for my mother to take lessons from him. Once my grandfather was passing by this tailor's house and saw my mother babysitting his child. My grandfather got angry at this - he was paying the tailor to teach my mother. He told the tailor that Mandemberg's daughter could not be a baby sitter for an ordinary tailor's child. He took my mother home and bought her a sewing machine. He told her to sit down and sew and do whatever she wanted, but she wouldn't go to study any more. And she learned to sew.

My mother went to the Jewish school in Makarov. Her brothers Lyova and Iosif studied there, too. I don't know how many years my mother attended this school, but I know that it was all the education she got. She read and wrote well in Yiddish.

My mother's brother Iosif married a young woman named Sonia, and her brother Lyova married Sonia's mother. Her name was Frieda, and she was much older than Lyova, but they got along very well. Iosif was missing in action during the Second World War, and Lyova was in the evacuation in Zelenodolsk, in the Tatarskaya Soviet Socialist Republic. He was evacuated with the "Lenin's Smithy" plant where he was working at the time. After the war he returned to Kiev but he didn't live long afterwards and died some time in 1950.

My father, Anatoliy Mikhailovich Waldman was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1899. I guess he had a Jewish name but I don't know it. He came from a very poor family. His father died during an accident at the plant, leaving my grandmother alone with five children. My father was captured when he was in the Polish Army fighting against the Red Army. He stayed in Russia and got to Kiev somehow. He got a job as a sailor at the Dnipro Fleet in Kiev and met my mother there.

By this time my mother and her brothers sold the house in Makarov and moved to Kiev. Those were very difficult years. My mother worked very hard. She traveled around to villages and sewed in exchange for food and food products. She was actually the provider for her brothers. They were renting a room in a private house in Demeyevka, on the outskirts of Kiev. During pogroms in Kiev they would hide in basements. My mother and father met often and loved each other very much. My father didn't look like a Jew, and he was able to go out into the town to bring them some food. My parents got married in 1921. They didn't have a real wedding. They just registered their marriage and started their life together. They bought an apartment in a house in Podol. In 1923 my older brother Mikhail was born, and I was born in 1928. There were just two of us children. My mother continued to work as a dressmaker and also taught my father to sew. He became a very good tailor - he learned to make trousers. He worked at a tailor shop, but he worked at home and took the finished items to the shop.

I knew the words "financial inspector" from my early childhood. We were very much afraid of these people in our house. The reason was that my father had just learned to make leather coats, which were in fashion. But he didn't have a license to make them, so this business of his was illegal. The license was very expensive. He was only allowed to keep items that were registered in the shop at home. And we kids always knew that we were not supposed to talk either at school or in the courtyard about what was going on at home. Financial inspectors came to our home often and searched the house, but my father always managed to hide the items on time and everything went well.

We had two small rooms in an apartment that we shared with other people. There were Primus

stoves in the kitchen and each family had its own table. My father earned good money [on the side], but we couldn't afford good clothes or food, as our neighbors could report to the police that we were spending more than we were supposed to. Now I understand that they did report on us every now and then, which is why the financial inspectors used to come.

My mother was religious. She always tried to celebrate the Jewish holidays and cooked all the traditional food. There was matzo at home for Pesach. But as my father wasn't religious these celebrations were quite modest. My mother's brothers Lyova and Isif used to visit us, and her older stepbrothers and stepsister also often visited us at the holidays. They came with their families and at those times we had a big Jewish family, or as we say in Yiddish, a "mishpocha".

At home we also always celebrated the Soviet holidays - May 1 and the Anniversary of the October Revolution. My father loved these holidays. He loved it when my mother's relatives came to visit. His own relatives had stayed in Poland, where they had a very difficult life. My father used to send parcels there while it was allowed. In the middle of '30s it became rather unsafe to have any relationships with foreigners - one could be arrested and put in prison for this - so my father broke all contact with his family.

In 1932 my father's cousin Wolf came to Kiev illegally. We called him Volodia. In 1937 my father's other brother came from Poland. He crossed the border with his two daughters. It was a surprise for us when he came. He only stayed a few days, then the police came for him and his children and sent him to the North. My father never found out what had happened to them. Later another cousin, David, came. My father knew that he shouldn't stay in Kiev and took him to the town of Belaya Tserkov. His cousin lived there until the beginning of the war. He visited us every Saturday, and my mother did his laundry and cooked delicious food. She felt very sorry for him. In 1939, when the fascists entered Poland and the persecution of Jews began, my father's sister Manya Mordkovich and her husband and son came to us. They didn't have the legal right to live in the city, so my father took them to Korostyshev. Every time his relatives from Poland arrived, our divisional policeman showed up as if from nowhere. I think our neighbors reported on the relatives. My father paid the fines and took his relatives 100 km away from Kiev.

My mother went to a synagogue that was not far from where we lived. We kids often went with her or just ran there ourselves. We were very curious, but this curiosity couldn't be taken for any interest in religion. My mother often told me what her father had taught her: the history of the Jewish people and the ancient Torah, but frankly speaking, I wasn't interested that much in these subjects. My mother talked to me in Yiddish. I understood what she was saying but I couldn't answer her in the same language.

My brother Mikhail went to a Jewish school. Later, all Jewish schools were closed and he went to a Russian school. I went to a Jewish kindergarten, whose teachers were Jewish. They spoke Yiddish to us, but we kids communicated in Russian. They celebrated Jewish holidays in this kindergarten, too. This didn't last long, though. By the time I had to start elementary school they had closed the Jewish schools and the kindergarten, so I went to a Russian school. There were children of various nationalities in our class. We never felt any difference in attitude towards the Jewish children. We all got along very well. There were other Jewish children in our courtyard, and the few Russian children there also spoke Yiddish. We all understood each other well. At school I became a young "Octobrist" and then a pioneer. It was interesting at school. We went to the circus, to performances

at the Puppet Theater and on excursions.

In the middle of June 1941 my mother and I went to stay at Aunt Manya's in Korostyshev for few days. She wanted to leave me there for the summer vacation. My brother Mikhail stayed in Kiev as he was taking his final exams at school. We were at Korostyshev when we heard about the beginning of the war. I didn't quite understand what it was all about, but I got scared looking at the adults. My mother and Aunt Manya were sobbing, listening to foreign minister Molotov's speech. My mother tried to rush back to Kiev immediately, but the buses were not running, and panic burst out. We stood on the road for a long while until we got a ride to Kiev on a truck filled with soldiers. When we arrived home my father and brother had already received call-up papers from the recruiting office. My father was 44 and the age limit for the army was 45. We said our farewells to my father in the yard of School 124, where all the new recruits were gathered. Misha, along with other young people, was sent to Donbass to harvest the crops. They were trying to save the younger people and sent them to the East rather than to the front. My father's military unit was sent to Lubny. Somewhere on the way my father met Misha and gave him the photographs that he had with him.

Just two of us were left at home: my mother and I. I remember air raids in Kiev. During these air raids the airplanes flew very low and shot at people. This was very frightening, and we hid in the entrances of houses. At night my mother sent me down to our neighbor's basement, as there were raids at night, too.

We received a letter from my father letting us know that he was in Lubny. My father's brother Wolf was involved in the evacuation of factories. He insisted that we be evacuated and promised my father to evacuate us from Kiev. By that time we knew that Hitler was exterminating the Jewish people. Wolf sent us away in September, along with my uncle Iosif's wife and her neighbor. This woman's husband was an officer, and we all were put on the train as an officer's family. Our trip was long, and there were bombardments along the way. We finally arrived at the Northern Caucasus and were all accommodated in the court building in Piatigorsk. There were many families, and we all slept on the floor. One night somebody knocked on the door, and when I went to the window to see who it was, I saw Misha standing there! It turned out that when the Germans approached Donbass all the mobilized young people were dismissed. Misha knew where we were from a letter and managed to reach us. I was so excited that I jumped from that window, on the first floor, into his arms and my mother ran to him with tears. At that time we had no information about my father. But we all knew that our army was surrounded near Lubny, and in fact they all died. My mother had lost any hope of seeing my father alive again. When the Germans approached the Northern Caucasus, we had to flee. We boarded horse-driven wagons and moved along the mountainous roads to Nevinnomyssk. My brother and two girl neighbors were hiding under our clothes, as they could be mobilized for trench excavation. My mother said she wasn't going to let my brother go. In Makhachkala we didn't manage to get on the train because there were too many people. My mother was crying and begging the soldiers to take us with them, but they didn't do so. It turned out for better, though - this train was destroyed by bombs. We reached Makhachkala on the next train. From there we went to Astrakhan by boat. In Astrakhan we sat on the pier for a long time. It was cold as it is in December. There were many Jews from Bessarabia there. They had been on the pier for a long time as they were afraid to leave their luggage. It was here, on this pier in Astrakhan, that for the first time in my life I saw people dying from cold and hunger. In a few days

they announced that they would be evacuating the families of soldiers. We were on the lists as the family of an officer. They put us on a train going to Central Asia. It was a long trip. We hardly had any clothes that could be bartered for food. Sonia, the wife of my mother's brother Iosif, was with us. She had a baby girl named Fiera, after my mother's sister who had died. Sonia didn't have any milk. We were starving. At one point, when the train stopped my brother ran to the fields to get some snow and melted it on our little stove. We gave this drink to the baby, but Firochka, the baby, died. Sonia held her, afraid that somebody would take her baby away. Our neighbor who was traveling with us asked her "Why is Fiera so silent? Why isn't she crying?" and Sonia said "I don't know. She may be asleep." The neighbor looked at the baby – Dear Lord! She was dead! And she began to cry saying that Fiera had died. Soldiers came immediately and said they had to take the dead baby to a special car of the train -- many people were dying on the train, and their bodies were taken to a special car. It took my brother some effort to take the dead girl from Sonia. He took her to that car. At one point, the train stooped and all the dead people were buried in a common grave. And our Fierochka stayed there too, in a common grave somewhere, we don't even know where it is.

Eventually, we arrived in Semipalatinsk, a town not far from Alma-Ata. We got accommodation with a Russian family. The hostess was a pig-tender at the collective farm. She brought intestines from where she worked and my mother made sausage from them. She taught us to make this sausage and our life became easier. My brother was conscripted into the Army in 1942, from Semipalatinsk. He took part in the defense of Stalingrad and it was a miracle that he survived. Afterwards his unit was sent for R and R in Kazan, and later he was sent to the First Ukrainian Front. He wrote us that he was in an anti-tank gun service unit. After reading this letter my mother said that she would never see her son again. This was true. Misha sent his last letter from somewhere near Kiev. He wrote, "I will be in my native town soon" and we understood where he was. Later we received a letter from the commanding officer of the unit, informing us that Misha had been severely wounded on September 2 and died on the way to the hospital. This was a terrible blow to my mother. Her brother Lyova arrived to help us cope with this grief. He took us to Zelenodolsk, in the Tatarskaya SSR. I finished seventh grade there and went to work at a factory. It was very hard work. I carried heavy cast iron blanks. I felt very sleepy, especially during night shifts. Once I fell asleep on a box during the night shift. The chief of the shift woke me up and told me to go on working. A woman said to him "Let her have a nap, she's just a child." But he answered, "If she wants to receive her bread card, she must work." I was entitled to 500 grams of bread with my card. My mother worked at the cattle and vegetable yard of this plant, but after her legs started swelling she couldn't go to work any more.

Victory Day, May 9, 1945, found us still in Zelenodolsk. I remember people coming into the streets, kissing and rejoicing. Soldiers were shooting off their weapons. It was a happy day, but it was also filled with sorrow for the lost ones. This was true for our family, too. We returned to Kiev in 1946 with the "Lenin's smithy" plant. Somebody told us that our neighbors had seen our father in 1941 near Lubny. He told them that he was going back to Kiev to find out what happened to us. Then somebody told us another story. They said that when uncle Pinia and his family were being sent to Babi Yar, they were accompanied by a blond man. All her life my mother believed that this was my father. We were notified by the recruitment office that my father was missing. We still don't know for sure what happened to him.

My mother was a religious person before the war, but after she lost her loved ones, after Babi Yar, she couldn't believe any more. She said "How could He let this happen? How could He allow the death of all, whom I loved? I believed in him all my life!"

My mother's brother Iosif also perished during the war, and his wife Sonia couldn't bear the loss of her husband and daughter and died in 1947.

My father's cousin David Waldman went to the front as volunteer from Belaya Tserkov at the very beginning of the war. Later he was wounded and sent to Central Asia, where he got married. After the war he moved to Poland and then to Canada, where he died in 1990. When he was in Poland he found out that my grandmother (my father's mother) and all his relatives in Poland were exterminated in the Warsaw Ghetto.

My father's cousin Wolf Waldman returned from the front to Kiev, where he died in 1956.

When we ourselves returned to Kiev we didn't have anywhere to live because our apartment was occupied, so we moved in with our relatives. My mother applied to a court to get our apartment back, but the court refused her. Then the man living in our apartment allowed us to move in. He divided a room and we received a section that measured 10 square meters. The conditions were terrible - we didn't have enough living space, and the water and toilet were outside. But we were happy to have what we could have. My mother went to work at a shop and I entered a trade school at shoe factory #4. I finished this school and got a job as assistant shoemaker.

Soon I met my future husband. His name is Vladimir Haimovich Portnoy. He was born in Kiev in 1925. He had a sister and two brothers. Yasha Orlov, one of his brothers, died near Oryol and was posthumously awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union. My husband's parents, Haim Portnoy and Sheindl Portnaya, were very religious people. I didn't know his father: he died during the war in the evacuation. His mother Sheindl always attended synagogue and had a seat there. She celebrated all the Jewish holidays. We visited her frequently. Actually I learned about the Jewish holidays from my mother-in-law. In 1948 Volodia and I got married. We didn't have a wedding, our marriage was just registered at the registration office. I made myself a new dress, but we didn't have any rings. My mother baked some pastries and sweets and we invited our neighbors to celebrate our wedding. In 1949 our daughter Tatiana was born. The four of us were living in that 10 square meter room. We were not allotted an apartment.

This was the period of anti-Semitism, the so-called "doctors' plot" in Moscow and the struggle against "cosmopolitans." We actually didn't face much anti-Semitism personally, except for the fact that we couldn't get an apartment because we were Jews. And the situation at the factory was very difficult. David Raigorodetskiy, the director of the factory, was a Jew. He was a dedicated and honest man. He was director during the evacuation and restored the factory after the war. In 1953 they [the authorities] fired him and wanted to open a case against him. Fortunately, they were late in taking him to court; by that time Stalin had died. During this period many Jews were removed from their official positions in Kiev. My husband couldn't find a job for a long time, even though he was just an assistant shoemaker. So he signed a contract for a job in Sakhalin, in the Far North. I stayed in Kiev alone with my child. It was very difficult to place a child in a kindergarten. I claimed that my husband had abandoned us, so I could get the status of a single mother and my daughter could go to kindergarten. In 1956 our son Efim was born. We were still living in that same room. My husband was supposed to be allotted an apartment, but in 1961 my mother died. The authorities

told us that we couldn't get an apartment, as there were [only] four of us left. We received an apartment in 1963, when my daughter was 14 and my son -7 years old.

My children knew well what anti-Semitism was like. One day when my son was eight or ten years old he came home from school in tears asking me why the other children called him "zhyd". When he was in the army he was also taunted for being a Jew. Once he lost control and beat the guy who was baiting him. His commanding officer was Georgian. He called my son and asked him why he had beaten that guy. My son answered "He called me a zhyd." Then his commander said to him "You should have beaten him more."

After the army my son graduated from a construction technical school and went to work in Kiev. He moved to Israel in 1990, as soon as it became possible. He lives there now with his wife and his sons Oleg and Anatoliy and works for construction companies as an engineer. Oleg is 20. He is in the Israeli Army. [At the time of the interview he was based in Gaza.] Basically, my grandchildren have turned into real Israel citizens.

My daughter Tatiana worked in a department store for many years and was Head of the Komsomol unit there, but for several years in a row she was denied entrance into the Commerce and Economy Institute. She also was recommended to be elected to the local council. Of course, she didn't get enough votes, but an acquaintance told her, "Tania, why are you doing this? You won't be accepted." She asked "Why?" and he said "Have you forgotten your item (item 5 in the Soviet passport - nationality)?" Tania married a Jew - Alexandr Zeltser. They have two sons, Mikhail, born in 1969 and Victor, born in 1978. After finishing school Misha decided to enter the technical school at the radio plant. They rejected his documents and explained to him that they couldn't admit Jews to a technical school related to the radio electronic industry. This happened in 1986 at the beginning of Perestroika. My son-in-law wrote a letter about it and sent it to the authorities in Moscow. A few weeks later we received a letter from the school asking Misha to re-submit his documents. But my grandson refused to enter that school. He went to the town of Tallinn in Estonia and entered the Polytechnic Institute there. He met a girl in Tallinn, Natasha, and fell in love with her. Natasha and her parents emigrated to Israel, and Mikhail followed her some time later. He loved Natasha and wanted to be with her. They got married and recently moved to the United States. They have a daughter Nicole, my great-granddaughter. My younger grandson Victor entered the technical Institute in Kiev in 1996 with no problems. He works as a programmer in Kiev.

My husband Vladimir Portnoy died in 1996. Toward the end of his life we always celebrated the Jewish holidays. Nowadays my daughter Tatiana and her husband celebrate them. They go to concerts at the Jewish Cultural Center. I also go to concerts at the Jewish Center Hesed and read Jewish newspapers. I have been in Israel several times and I like that country so much. I hope the war will be over there, and I won't be concerned about my children and grandchildren any more. Thank you for listening to my family story.