

Biking to Freedom

Early Years in Paris

Francine Taylor was born July 14, 1928 in Karczew, Poland to parents who were highly skilled tailors. When she was only two years old, her family immigrated or moved to Paris after antisemitism (hostility and prejudice against Jews) in Poland had exposed their family to hate and unjust treatment. They were told there was plenty of work in France, and no discrimination.

Within a few years, her father was able to get a proper work permit to begin his tailoring business and they moved into a small apartment. Francine and her older sister began school and learned French quickly.

Meanwhile, Francine's parents exchanged letters with their family that remained in Poland. Things were still hard. But when Germany took over Poland in September 1939, Francine and her family noticed the letters began to be censored by the German government, with parts blacked out and impossible to read. One day, they received a letter that reported the family was doing well except for all the lemons "We have everything we need! Lemons everywhere!" the letters claimed. Several letters arrived with references to lemons and they couldn't understand why.

One day her father caught on and said, "It's a secret message. There's a message between the lines written in lemon juice."

"How do we read it, Papa?" Francine asked.

"Watch," he said, striking a match. As the heat and smoke swirled behind the message, words began to appear like magic.

"What does it say?" Francine asked, amazed.

Her father sucked in a breath and a frown deepened in his brow. "We are starving to death and expect to be killed at any time. The German Nazis are horrible, and each day is another day of terror."

Her parents stood shocked. Francine's father had reassured their family that the German occupation of Poland and other places in Europe would end quickly. He'd always said they would be okay. The Germans had control of all the media and news coming

out of Poland, so no one knew how bad things had gotten there.

By the spring of 1940, Nazi Germany had already conquered Poland, Austria, and Belgium along with several other countries, and they had set their sights on invading France next. The attacks in France reached Paris in June 1940, just a month before Francine turned twelve years old. The Germans divided France into two zones, the northern area where Paris was located was occupied and directly controlled by the Nazis. The southern area was known as Free France and the people were allowed to rule themselves as long as they followed any demands made of them by Nazi Germany.

Life began to get harder for Francine and her family almost immediately. Nazi Germany imposed restrictions on the Jews in occupied France, including registration and curfews. On the day their family had to get yellow stars to wear on their clothing, her father sat the family down, the star crumpled in his hand. The Nazis wanted not only to humiliate the Jews by forcing them to wear yellow stars, but to single them out and isolate them in their communities, restricting when they could be out on the street. Eventually, those registers would be used to identify and transport Jews to work and concentration camps.



Young man in Paris wearing yellow star, 1942 (photo via ushmm.org)

Francine's father saw the danger coming, and said to his wife and daughters, "I cannot leave Paris because I have important work here, but if the Germans begin to come for the Jews in Paris, then we each have to run for our lives. Don't wait or try to save anyone else. Run."

Francine and her sister promised, but they could not imagine running away from the Germans alone.

By 1942, the restrictions were oppressive. Francine's family had ration cards marked "Jew" to obtain what little food remained available. They often had to stand in line for hours to get whatever was on hand.

Francine had been sick off and on through the winter and spring of 1942, and when a doctor found spots on her lungs, he told her parents that it would be best for Francine to go to the countryside for fresh air and rest. They found a boarding house that would take in children, a little over a hundred miles south of Paris, and an older couple took care of Francine and the others staying there.

The plan had always been for Francine to stay in the countryside for the summer and then come home to Paris, but on her birthday, July 14, Francine received a message that she had a phone call at the post office, since there were no phones at the boarding house. She assumed it was her family calling to wish her a happy birthday. It wasn't.

A Journey Begins by Bike

When Francine answered the phone, she began to talk about her birthday celebration at the boarding house, but was quickly met with a harsh command to be quiet. Francine stilled, and the phone began to shake in her hand. It wasn't her mother, but a cousin on the line.

"Be quiet. I'm not calling for your birthday," her cousin said. "Your father was taken."

Tears sprang into Francine's eyes. "Your mother and sister are in hiding, and I'm sending you 3,500 Franks and an address in Dax in the southernmost part of Free France. You will go there and find your mother and sister around Toulouse."

"But how will I go by myself?" Francine asked.

"You must do it. The Germans have picked up all the Jews in Paris—men, women, children. We don't

know where they've gone and who is alive or dead. You will go to Dax [a town in Southern France]. Do you understand? I can't talk any more."

Francine agreed and hung up the phone. Back at the boarding house, everyone surprised her by singing happy birthday with a cake. Francine cried, and the others thought they were tears of joy, but she wished more than anything to see and talk to her mother, father, and sister. Getting to Toulouse might be her only hope to reach them.

As soon as the package arrived from her cousin, Francine made preparations to leave. She packed a small suitcase and strapped it to her bike, hugging her summer friends at the boarding house goodbye. She rode to the nearest train station in Tours to make her way to Dax.

The train station was crawling with German police, and Francine was glad she hadn't brought or worn her yellow star. At the ticket counter, she discovered that the train to Tours had already left, and the next one wouldn't come until the following day. She looked around her, afraid that someone might ask her for identification. The only ID she had was her ration card that was marked "Jew," and she knew she had to avoid showing it to anyone. The Germans were actively trying to keep Jews from escaping into Free France.

Francine tried first to go to a hotel to stay the night, but the clerk had questions about why a young teenage girl was traveling alone with no paperwork. Francine tried to say she was a runaway, but the clerk said they were calling the police. Francine fled. She rode her bike back to the train station where she locked herself in a stall in the bathroom overnight.

The next morning, she bought her ticket, loaded her bike into the last wagon which was a luggage compartment and found her seat. She felt like she could finally take a deep breath. This train would take her closer to her mother and sister.

But only fifteen minutes into the ride, the train stopped. The other people sitting with her began to ask questions.

"I wonder why they are stopping here?"

"It's the Germans," another said. "They are looking for Jews."

Francine had to think quickly. She knew that with

no ID card, she was likely to be taken. She had no purse with her—all her belongings were in the little suitcase with her bike. When the Germans boarded their train car, they demanded ID. As the others began pulling papers and identification cards from their wallets and pockets, Francine took the man's arm beside her.

"I'm with this gentleman," she said politely. The man didn't object, and the Germans passed on.

Francine turned to the man. "Thank you for helping me. I lost my purse and you know how these Germans are. They'll drag you away assuming you're a Jew," she said, hoping he'd accept her story.

"You're right," he said, patting her arm in an understanding way. "At the next station, you need to go to the police station and make sure you have them give you a temporary ID or paperwork to stay out of trouble. You won't be so lucky next time."

Francine agreed and thanked him again. At the next stop, Francine got off the train with her bike and suitcase and began to peddle toward Dax.

It would take her a month to get there, stopping in small towns to buy what food she could, sleeping in fields at night to avoid having to explain why she had no identification.

Crossing the Woods

Francine arrived in the resort town of Dax in August, and again, she noticed the German police everywhere. The Germans were limiting transportation, so the only thing available was a horse and buggy. She got in line to take one.

She paid her fare and climbed in with her bike and suitcase to sit with two nuns. As they waited to leave, Francine saw the German police stop the wagon in front of them. Her heart sank as she saw the police force the family out of the wagon and into custody. Francine tried not to stare, and she hoped that they wouldn't stop her wagon too. Her buggy made it past the German guards without incident, and Francine breathed a sigh of relief.

The address she'd been given was a small business with a woman inside who was not Jewish.

"Let's get you clean, fed, and rested. Tomorrow the young men will show you the way to cross into Free France," the woman said.

Francine paid the woman and enjoyed her bath

and a deep sleep.

The next morning, the young men came, barely older than Francine, and they led her with her bike and suitcase out into the countryside, looking like a group of friends out for a day of fun. They walked across fields and rivers, and when night fell, they snuck into a barn where they slept.

At first light, they set out again, and in no time, they said, "Here you are. This is Free France. Just follow that road until you arrive in Pau where you can call your family."

The young men said it wasn't far. They hurried back the way they came, and Francine pushed on in the direction of Pau.

As she rode along the country road, she noticed signs posted every so often that said "Attention! If you cross you will be shot on sight!" and she noticed that there were tiny guard houses with armed Germans inside.

Francine realized that they hadn't taken her all the way to Free France at all. It was across the road beyond the fences and German guards.

As Francine rode, she paid attention to the woods, keeping a sharp eye out for the guard houses. They were far apart, and she decided that as soon as she was out of sight of the next one, she would duck into the woods and try to cross.

Francine got off her bike and walked it down the road until she looked in both directions. It seemed clear. She ran toward the woods and the downed trees that were a makeshift barrier. As she approached the barrier, she began to hear gunshots. With her head down, she ran until she couldn't run any more.

She woke in the dark when someone softly shook her shoulder.

"Shh..." the man's voice said. "Don't be afraid. You're in Free France, but we need to move and you can't make any noise. Are you shot?"

Francine lifted her head, cold and aching, and moved her hands and feet in circles, testing each part of her body for pain. She realized she must have tripped and fallen hard on a rock because her face hurt and her teeth felt loose.

"I don't think I was shot," she said, sitting up. "Where is my bike? My suitcase?"

The bike was nearby, but she didn't see her suitcase. She gently stood and followed the man to a

house nearby. It was the middle of the night and the man's wife was in a panic.

"She cannot stay! The Germans will come searching, and we'll all be killed."

The man pointed Francine to a wash basin to clean up. The man calmed his wife.

"She is a child, only fourteen. We can help."

She murmured something to him about their sleeping children upstairs, and the man returned to Francine.

"You can't stay, but let me get you a few clothes to change into and some food to at least help you get back on the road."

Francine thanked him, changed her clothes and took the food, and she rode her bike toward Toulouse. She'd remembered the name of the business where she was supposed to go, and once in Toulouse, she asked for directions to the shop.

The woman who answered the door ushered Francine inside.

"You are here!" she said. "Your mother and sister left some time ago, believing you dead. They will be so surprised! Tomorrow we will put you on the bus to Graulhet. That's where your mother and sister went."

It had been several months since she'd seen or even heard from her family, but she felt like she was closer to them than she'd been all summer. The next morning she got on the bus full of hope, with thanks to the woman who'd helped her.

In Graulhet, Francine departed the bus, took her bike, and asked someone at the station to point her in the direction of the address she'd been given. She rode her bike down the street and stopped outside the house that matched the address, hoping that her remaining family would be inside. She knocked on the door, and a thin older woman answered.

Francine almost didn't recognize her, she'd lost so much weight. "Mama?" she said. Her mother's hand flew to her mouth and she fainted right there in the doorway. Francine rushed forward calling for help and knelt beside her mother, holding her hand and reassuring her that she'd made it, she was safe,

and they were together again at last.



Francine, her mother, and sister in their Paris apartment after the war, 1948 (photo via The Holocaust Quilt, CofC)

After the War

It would take another two years and the end of the war before Francine, her mother, and sister finally made it back to Paris where her uncle helped them find work and while they waited to see if they could get their apartment back to begin rebuilding their lives. They learned that her father had been taken because he was working with the French Underground to help Jews to safety. He had been sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau shortly after being detained where he was killed by the Nazis.

Years later when Francine recalled the fear, difficulties, and loss her family faced during World War II and the Holocaust, she continued to hold out gratitude for the people who helped her and her family. Despite the antisemitism even in France, there were so many people who risked their lives, their families to help.

There are always people who help in the darkest times. May we be those people when hate rises up and threatens others in our communities too.

Source:

Taylor, Francine. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1990.

Francine Taylor

Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before you read:

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

Questions to think about as you read:

1. Why did Francine's family move to Paris?
2. What kinds of restrictions did Francine's family begin to face when Germany overtook France?
3. Why did Francine go to the countryside?
4. What do you think was the most dangerous part of Francine's journey across France and why?
5. Who do you think was most helpful to Francine? Why?

Final reflection:

1. What will you remember most from this survivor's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?