


August 2010

Fejga Braun oral history interview by David Purnell, August 25, 2010

Fejga Braun (Interviewee)

David Purnell (Interviewer)

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Scholar Commons Citation

Braun, Fejga (Interviewee) and Purnell, David (Interviewer), "Fejga Braun oral history interview by David Purnell, August 25, 2010" (2010). *Digital Collection - Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center Oral Histories*. Paper 182.
http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/hgstud_oh/182

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Oral History Program
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University of South Florida, Tampa Library

Digital Object Identifier: F60-00039
Interviewee: Fejga Braun (FB)
Interviewer: David Purnell (DP)
Interview date: August 25, 2010
Interview location: St. Petersburg, Florida
Transcribed by: Mary Beth Isaacson, MLS
Transcription date: January 11, 2011 to January 12, 2011
Audit Edit by: Kimberly Nordon
Audit Edit date: January 18, 2011
Final Edit by:
Final Edit date:

David Purnell: Today is the twenty-fifth of August, 2010. We're interviewing Fejga Braun. My name is David Purnell. We're in St. Petersburg, Florida, in the USA. The language is English, and the videographer is Jane Duncan.

Ms. Braun, could you please tell us your name and spell your name for us, please?

Fejga Braun: My name is Fejga Braun. F-e-j-g-a, Fejga, Braun, B-r-a-u-n.

DP: Thank you. And where were you born?

FB: I was born in Poland. Now it's Belorussia. And I went to a Polish school; I finished. The first public school was Polish.

DP: And what was the town you were born in, in Poland? What was the name of the town?

FB: The name of the town—it's a very small town, surrounded with a river. The name was Nowa Mijsz.

DP: And can you spell Nowa Mijsz for us?

FB: N-o-w-a, Nowa, Mijsz, M-i-j-s-z.

DP: Okay. All right. Nowa Mijsz, Poland, and that's now Belarus.

FB: Now Belarus.

DP: Okay. And how many siblings did you have?

FB: Two children.

DP: No, no, how many brothers and sisters did you have?

FB: Oh. I had three brothers and two sisters. The oldest brother—I shall tell that?

DP: Yes, please.

FB: The oldest brother was a very good swimmer, and he was in the army working on the bridges.

DP: And what was his name?

FB: It was David.

DP: Okay. And what was the other two brothers' names?

FB: The other brother was very good; every work he did was perfect. And he was a carpenter.

DP: A carpenter?

FB: Yes.

DP: And his name?

FB: Sam.

DP: Sam. Okay.

FB: Sam Gallay.

DP: And your third brother?

FB: Third brother was engineer, electrical engineer. At that time it was the first engineers in the world.

DP: Wow.

FB: It was the beginning of that.

DP: And what was his name?

FB: Jochel.

DP: And how do you spell Jochel?

FB: Y—no, not Y. J-o-c-h-e-l.

DP: Okay. And then you had two sisters.

FB: We were three sisters. I had two sisters.

DP: Okay.

FB: The oldest sister was Yenta.

DP: Yenta, okay.

FB: The other was Rachel.

DP: And Rachel.

FB: She's still alive.

DP: And is Rachel the only sibling that you still—that's still alive?

FB: Yes.

DP: Okay. And she lives in Israel, right?

FB: Yes.

DP: Okay. With her husband?

FB: He was, but died.

DP: Oh, the husband passed away? Okay. But she's still in Israel.

FB: She is still in Israel. She has four sons. One was sick and he is gone, too. And older sons finished Jerusalem the university. They are very nice people. And the grandchildren, she has twelve grandchildren.

DP: Twelve grandchildren. Oh, my.

FB: Every one has four.

DP: Good. Now, you have two children.

FB: Yes. I never—no abortion, nothing. It was regular, two children.

DP: And both boys? You had two boys, yes?

FB: Two boys.

DP: Yes. And what were their names?

FB: The oldest is Ben Ami, because I didn't know if my father's not alive or not. I was separated. It was no post. We didn't know if they are alive, even. They didn't know if I were alive.

DP: Now, Ben Ami was born during the war, correct?

FB: Yes, in Russia.

DP: In 1943?

FB: Forty-three [1943].

DP: Okay. And your other son?

FB: My other son is born in Germany.

DP: In Germany. In Garmisch?

FB: Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

DP: Okay. And what is your youngest son's name?

FB: Eliahu Meier. His name is after my father.

DP: And he's the one you call Ely, correct?

FB: Yes.

DP: Okay. And he was born in 1948?

FB: Forty-eight [1948], five years apart.

DP: Okay. All right. So now that we've got the preliminary information out of the way, where did you want to start with your story? What did you want to tell us first?

FB: My story, how I start the book. My younger son ask me that. "Ma, I would like to know how it happened, everything: from where you come, who you are." And I was that time working. I was a single mother, because I had divorced my husband.

DP: And you divorced after you got to the United States, correct?

FB: I divorced before I came.

DP: Oh, before you came. Okay.

FB: Yes, I was in Israel at that time.

DP: So, in Israel, okay.

FB: Because it was—in Israel they divorce for reasons. If you have a reason you do that, and if you have not a special reason—not all reasons they are accepted. In the United States I couldn't have a divorce, because you don't accept that.

DP: Okay. So in your hometown, when you were a young girl, how did you end up—well, first of all, did you experience any anti-Semitism growing up?

FB: No.

DP: None at all?

FB: Not at all. The teachers, they were anti-Semitic, but the teachers loved me like I would be their child. Even they expressed, “When I will get married, I will like to have a little girl like you.” I was that time eight or nine years old.

DP: Now, you were very—you were the princess of the town, you told me in the pre-interview.

FB: Yes, the teacher give me the name the “princess of the town.”

DP: Okay.

FB: Because they say, “You are the best student,” and it was not just by teaching but even with the appearance. I was very gentle and nice, and they called me the princess of the town. And they were very anti-Semitic. It means that I—

DP: You were very well liked.

FB: That's right. They loved me, really.

DP: Now, how old were you when you had to leave your hometown in Poland?

FB: Eighteen years.

DP: Eighteen years old. And how did you come about having to leave?

FB: It was the Jewish people were moving out of our town. It was the schooling, and it start to be like—friends I lost, because they moved. They moved.

DP: So you lost a lot of friends.

FB: Yes. And my father that time made out papers to go to Israel to open the University of Jerusalem. The war broke out. My mother sent me out the day before the war broke out, and she said—my husband that time was working in northern Poland. He was an electric engineer. And I came, and the next day was the war. I couldn't come back, because I came just to see if I can live, have a place where to live, and come back for my clothes, because I usually would wear a nice dress there. And the war broke out and I couldn't come, even. I was there just with one pair of shoes and one dress on me. Everything I didn't have into change.

DP: So you had to leave everything behind.

FB: Yes, because I had to go back. And the only thing what we had is some money, because he got from where he was working, the payday. And we got a bicycle, because he was going to work, from place. You know, when you build an airport, there is plenty to work.

DP: So he was working on an airport, so he was using the bicycle to get back and forth to the areas he was working in.

FB: To see what the people do right, what not. We had a bicycle. And my niece was not far away in a camp, a summer camp.

DP: Okay.

FB: And I said, "I am not leaving. I have to take my niece. I will come home and then she will be lost. The war is coming." Then they helped me with that, the people where I was living, to go to the camp and pick her up. And that is Eva Gallay.

DP: Yes, I have this in the book here.¹ If you don't mind, I'll read a little part of it, is that okay?

FB: That is Eva Gallay. That's my niece.

DP: Yes, your niece. You found her and took her with you.

FB: Yes. And she's now a very happy person.

DP: That's excellent. So, if you don't mind, I'm gonna read a little bit of your book.

FB: Oh, yes.

DP: And then you can comment on it.

FB: Yes.

¹*In the Face of Adversity: The Story of My Life, Feiga Gallay Braun*, by Eva Gallay Gregoratos; published by AuthorHouse in 2005. Gregoratos also wrote her own memoir, *An Unintended Odyssey: From War-Torn Europe to America*, published by AuthorHouse in 2008.

DP: So, you said, “I rented a wagon with some people whose daughter and son-in-law were working in the camp kitchen. They were going to pick them up, too. We travelled in the middle of the night and we came to the ferry; we had to wait until four in the morning before the ferry would cross the river. We finally came to the camp, and I told them that the war had started and I wanted to take my niece home. They asked me to be very quiet, because they did not want the other children awakened. No one seemed to know exactly where Eva was. All the children seemed to have dark hair, and they were all sleeping with their faces hidden in their pillows. I finally recognized some shoes which belonged to her. I woke her up and told her not to talk, but to get up quietly and come with me.” Do you remember when you did that?

FB: I remember every little piece.

DP: You remember the shoes, though.

FB: Everything. My memory, thank God, is very good.

DP: And so you recognized her by the shoes that she had worn.

FB: Yes, because children are sleeping with the head in the pillow, and they are all the same hair. They were cutting the same, every size, the length of the hair. I can't wake up all the children there; they asked me to be quiet. And I said, “She's here. Here are her shoes.” (laughs) She was a very wonderful child. The first thing that I said, “Shh, don't, don't, shh.” And she said, “Why I have to go?” And then she told me, “I have to take the cover. I promised my mother to bring it back.” It was very expensive. I said okay, but then it was too heavy to us to carry the cover on our bicycle. We had to choose more important things.

DP: Right.

FB: When I took her in that we leave here to some house passing by, and I will promise I will come to pick up [the quilt]. I never (inaudible) and besides, it's nothing worth it, the cover. I was looking to be alive.

DP: Now, what happened to Eva's parents?

FB: She was with me during the war. She was a very good child. She was never complaining, never crying, because I didn't cry. Because if [I did], I would be always crying. And she is now married to a very wonderful man, a wonderful guy. He's a doctor, a hospitalist.

DP: Very nice.

FB: And in the army. He was twenty years in the army, the American. When he belonged to the army he's a Canadian.

DP: Wow.

FB: And he's a father of three children. She has two daughters and a son, and they are married and they have four grandchildren. The oldest doesn't have children; she's a doctor in Alaska—my niece's children. And they love me very much, and I love them very much. They are my family. In the beginning they call me Grandma, because they didn't have a grandma. Then they realized everybody call me Aunt and I'm not their grandma. They call me Aunt, too. But it was a matter of they really were very loving kids, very wonderful people.

DP: Now, did you ever find out what happened to Eva's parents? Your brother?

FB: He was killed.

DP: He was killed.

FB: Together with my parents.

DP: With your parents. And is that anything you want to talk about, or you just want to not mention that right now?

FB: Well, if we can talk about?

DP: We can.

FB: You can ask me.

DP: Do you know how they were killed, or what happened to them?

FB: Yes. The next-door neighbor, a girl my age, wanted to have the house. When Hitler came, she killed my parents.

DP: Wow.

FB: And I learned about that later.

DP: And how did you find out that a neighbor killed your family?

FB: From another neighbor.

DP: From another neighbor? Wow. Now, did most of the people in your town—were they able to get out, or do you know?

FB: Most of the people were killed.

DP: Most of them were? Oh, killed. Most of them were killed. Okay. So, you—

FB: That's what you call the Holocaust.

DP: Yes. Now, where did you migrate to first? Where did you go to when you first left Poland?

FB: Well, I was born there.

DP: Yeah, but after you left—

FB: After, I didn't want even to see.

DP: You didn't want to see Poland.

FB: When I wrote the book, my younger son went to see my hometown.

DP: So did you go over there with him?

FB: I couldn't. We go with them. Very, very hard. And coming back, I wrote down that never go back, because it will only be the same thing. You just have in your mind what you lost.

DP: Now, when you left Poland, you went through Russia, correct?

FB: Yes. The only good thing was the Russian people. They were very good-natured, helping people.

DP: So you found that the Russian people helped you a lot?

FB: Yes. And they knew that I am Jewish.

DP: Now, how did you support yourself during this time?

FB: I was in a house [with] people I know them just during the war; before I didn't know them. One of them had a little girl, two years, and she was before the war not a dressmaker, but she was working by a machine sewing bras or something, underwear. And she didn't know how to cut for the little girl a dress, and I said, "I will do that." The dress, she made it from the bottom of her husband's shirts, because there was no material. But the bottom is always not shown, and it's still in good condition.

DP: So, you used the bottom of her husband's shirts to make a dress for her daughter.

FB: Dresses and aprons and everything. The child was sick—the children are having all kind of sickness—and a doctor came. And the doctor asked me if I am a dressmaker. I was not a dressmaker; I didn't have it in my mind to be that. And the other lady is very smart: she was behind the doctor and she was saying I should say yes. (laughs) I said yes. Whatever they ask me, she told me I should say yes. When they left, I said, "How am I a dressmaker? I have a needle and thimble and—scissors I don't have, even." "Don't worry. We will buy scissors on the market and you will buy a machine in the market, and in the beginning I will lend by my landlady. And then we will buy; we will make money and we will buy." And that's what it was.

DP: Now, when you say you bought things on the market, you're talking about the black market?

FB: It was a market.

DP: Oh, just a regular market.

FB: Regular market, and people sold things to buy bread.

DP: Now, later on, you sold things through the black market, yes?

FB: Later on was going on a black market, and I make money on that. I don't know if I write about that or not.

DP: Yes, because you talk about being arrested.

FB: That was in Russia, yes.

DP: And you were arrested for dealing in the black market?

FB: No.

DP: You spent three months in jail?

FB: I was arrested because they caught me with the bread.

DP: With bread.

FB: But I was praying. I was sitting up. It was the case, and when the case were, I had a lawyer and they asked the lawyer—it was during the night, not sleeping and thinking about the case. And I said, “What will be the questions?” “The questions will be bread, if you sold the bread, what they shall say.” I shall say that I just came and I don’t have a (inaudible). We had always a paper that we are registered and can have 200 gram of bread a day, or so; I don’t remember how much. And I told them I just came with a family, no father, but I didn’t lie. But I lie that I just came. Because I was not registered, I can say that. And the first thing, we had to eat, and I went out to buy bread. And they saw my honesty. It was very real, sound real, and I was free right away.

DP: Now—

FB: And the lawyer—the one who arrest me, he knew that I am lying because he saw me and he knew. Then he came over to me and said, “You know what? Maybe I will send you to Moscow to be a lawyer, because you will be the best lawyer in the world.” But the family of my husband didn’t let me to do that. He said, “Do you go and you will let him whatever you want to, and then they will give what they want to. It’s not good for you.” And I just say I can’t do that, because I have a niece. “The niece will live with you, and she will get school there.” But I am married, I have a husband. “The husband will come, too.” I said, “Well, I am supporting the family. It was an old father; nobody was working and they don’t know how to do anything. And I was out of school. (laughs) I want to go, but I couldn’t because really, I didn’t want to be—he told me, “You will just learn to be—they put a needle in, they will send you to the border”—and that I didn’t want—“to fight for Russia.”

DP: Now, how did you get from Russia to Germany?

FB: That was after the war.

DP: After the war?

FB: Yes.

DP: So you stayed in Russia until the war ended.

FB: Yes.

DP: Okay.

FB: I was staying in Russia and I was working and going to work by foot, there was no (inaudible).

DP: So you walked to work.

FB: Yes. Five miles, six miles.

DP: Five or six miles, wow. And what were the conditions when you walked to work? I mean, was it during the winter or summer?

FB: I was sewing.

DP: Yes, but I mean the weather.

FB: The weather in Russia was just like in Poland.

DP: Just like in Poland. So you had bad winters?

FB: Yeah, even harder.

DP: Even harder?

FB: Yes.

DP: And did you have proper clothing to be outside?

FB: No, I have to buy everything.

DP: You had nothing when you came there.

FB: Nothing to change, even, just what I had on me. When I bought it, it was very hard to choose. But with other things and the machine to fix it (inaudible).

DP: Now, when you went to Germany, where did you live when you went to Germany?

FB: I was living in Munich.

DP: Did you live in one of the camps there?

FB: We were for a while in the camp, then it was private.

DP: And how was living conditions in the displaced persons camp?

FB: Well, the conditions was not too bad. We were happy to have a roll, and we got food. It was not too bad.

DP: And did you do sewing in Germany, too?

FB: No.

DP: No.

FB: It was another time.

DP: And when you were in the displaced persons camp, you had the choice to go to America or Israel, correct?

FB: I choose to go to Israel.

DP: 'Cause you had—your sister was there, correct?

FB: Yes. Well, I had a brother in the United States, but then my brother come to visit me. He said, “Fej, it was in my mind having that I will help you to buy a house. But I see that you have to move away from your sister. She will never let you to have some. You will get three steps ahead and she will take you five back.” He knew better my sister than me. He was a very smart and very good man.

DP: So did he help you once you came to the States?

FB: Everything. He was for me like a father, like a mother, like—not just one brother, but I have everyone. And he loved my children. And my sister-in-law, I was afraid for her. I thought she has (inaudible), but she was so good to the children. When she came from the store, she was looking—she liked shopping and bringing for them a jacket, a new one. They had every season different things. She was just always bringing every time, and she was bringing more and had the right given back if they were not fitting, because they should not lose a day of school.

DP: Now, when you came to the United States, you had to leave Ben Ami back in Israel, correct?

FB: I left him, yes, because his age was that he had to wait. Mother can come first—(inaudible) sister. The mother has to go, then takes six months.

DP: You had to wait six months. Now, were you able to bring Ely with you, or did you have to wait for him also?

FB: No.

DP: 'Cause he was younger.

FB: He was born—he was younger, and he was born in Germany.

DP: So he was able to come with you.

FB: The Germany people had the rights without timing, waiting.

DP: Ben Ami was born in Russia, so he had to wait.

FB: Yes.

DP: After six months, you were able to bring him?

FB: Took six months, because the mother was going. If an uncle, would be six years.

DP: So if it was an uncle, it'd be six years.

FB: Yeah.

DP: Or another family member it'd be six years, but a mother can have them—bring their children over in six months.

FB: Yes.

DP: Wow. Now—

FB: When he—

DP: I'm sorry.

FB: He was talking to a lawyer before he planned that.

DP: Oh, so you planned it all out.

FB: And he followed whatever is easier and better.

DP: Okay. Now, did Eva come with you?

FB: No. Eva went to a children's camp.

DP: A children's camp.

FB: And that way, she made it past that.

DP: So she was already in the States.

FB: When I came, she was there already.

DP: Okay. And was she with your brother?

FB: She didn't want to be with my brother.

DP: Okay. So where was she staying?

FB: She felt very uncomfortable because the same age as a cousin, and the cousin was different. She was a very good girl, but she was a different character. She liked nice clothes, and Eva was just looking for books.

DP: She liked to read, yeah.

FB: The other finished high school (inaudible), but that was not enough, high school. She went to work, to Macy's. Right away she was a secretary. She made the language very fast, and she was for herself. My brother told me by letter, and I said, "Listen, they want to marry you off," and she didn't want to. I said, "Well, she has the right to marry whenever she wants to," because there, although I was already married, they thought—she feel it was not right. I said, "No, no, she doesn't feel not right. Let her marry whenever she wants to, and to whom she wants to. And don't be a matchmaker! You didn't like a matchmaker, and she doesn't like, too. Then you just put on another idea. Let her marry whenever she wants to. She has years to wait, other ten years."

DP: Okay.

FB: And then she met a guy who was just right for her. He was in school. She was so nice. She went to school, and he was a doctor. They get married, and it looks like it was the best in the world. He is now the head of the United States army, the third job and a real one of a kind.

DP: That's good. Now, when you finally made it to the United States, what year was that when you came here?

FB: It was fifty-nine [1959].

DP: Fifty-nine [1959]. And at that time, did you feel like you were experiencing any anti-Semitism in the United States?

FB: I don't know. I don't think so.

DP: You don't think so?

FB: I didn't feel.

DP: Okay. Now, during the pre-interview, you told me about—you made a dress for someone pretty famous. Do you recall that?

FB: Well, I made for three presidents' wives dresses.

DP: Yes.

FB: It was sixty-four [1964]. You remember it was Nixon that time?

DP: Yes.

FB: Nixon was right back, and it was Johnson. And I made it for Reagan's wife, a dress. Yes.

DP: Wow.

FB: I have a good memory, besides what I wrote the book, but in general. Very good.

DP: Now, how did you come about making these dresses for these First Ladies?

FB: They find very comfortable and very happy.

DP: So you were known for doing good work as a seamstress?

FB: I never learned.

DP: Never learned? (laughs)

FB: Before I start to work.

DP: It was all on-the-job training. You learned—taught yourself?

FB: I was very good with my hands, anything.

DP: Anything.

FB: Anything. I paint well, very beautiful.

DP: Yes. I heard you had some nice paintings.

FB: And I have the paintings, some. I was painting portraits; that's the hardest work. I have left over just my grandson, because he didn't took it. And the rest, my nieces and nephews, whenever they visit Brooklyn, New York, they [say], "Oh, you have my picture; may I take?" They want to take it. I was really a very good painter, and I didn't went to school with that.

DP: Let's go back to the dresses for the First Ladies. Who asked you to make these dresses?

FB: When I came, my brother said the first thing, "Go to the union. They will give you a job." When I came to the union, I said to them—I told them the truth, that I never was a dressmaker but I am good with my hands. Whatever I do, I do good. And I am a very responsible person. It was good that the head of the union was a Jew; otherwise he would not be able to express and tell them that. And I told them, "You know what? Try me out!" And then they try me out a day, and the (inaudible) called up. "We want the lady to have." And I was not the best operator, but the best who find the mistakes—and mistakes were there often. But then later I was the best operator, too. You know, the machine is just like a horse. The rider is good when he has the horse more years. Then I learned the machine, to operate fast, and I was making very good money. And how to live economic and good I learned on the way of my life, not in school. Everything I learned. In what

country I was, the first thing, I learned the language. The same day I was registered, I looked for work and I learned the language. I went to school in the evening, having two children.

DP: Wow.

FB: And my children are very obeying, and I was a good mother, too.

DP: So you supported your family by being a seamstress.

FB: Yes.

DP: Okay. And so was the place where you worked that asked you to make these dresses for the First Ladies?

FB: Yes.

DP: Oh, okay.

FB: They ask me, “You will do that?” I said yes. And then I took home—I just—I need papers to make the sketch, just books of (inaudible). But she wants something special, and I figured I will make something special. Then they give to me paper, and I came home and I start to sketch style, and then I show it to them, and I make for myself a dress and they saw how this looks. And I liked dresses (DP laughs) because my mother was having the most beautiful, expensive dresses, and I never saw her wearing that, because times were going upside down. But once a neighbor came to lend by her a dress—she was going to a wedding somewhere—and then I saw how she dressed up and I fell in love with that. And then I make it on a paper the style. Whatever I saw in the window, I made it.

DP: Wow. Now—

FB: Even knitting I never did, and I can—all the knitting (inaudible) exist.

DP: Hmm. That's pretty incredible. Now, is there anything else that you want to talk about, as far as your childhood or surviving through the war?

FB: The first thing when the war broke out, my father take me and said to go to the university. There was no schooling at all. My father taught me. I was very good in math, and my father taught me bookkeeping. But when I came in Russia, that is very dangerous profession because the Communist Party, they were telling you to write down and give out whatever they needed and then put in something else in the book. I didn't like it, so I will not mention even I know bookkeeping. What will I have to be responsible for their stealing? And I figured I will be a dressmaker.

DP: You pretty much did whatever you put your mind to.

FB: I make a living. People like it.

DP: Okay.

FB: I tried to be good to them and understandable.

DP: Now, before we wrap this up, is there anything else you want to share with us, anything you want to tell anybody who might be watching this video?

FB: Well, I want to tell advice, that you never think that you are lost. Try just a way to get ahead. Try a way not to give up but to get something, and not to be lazy. If you are lazy, nothing will come to you. You have to go there.

DP: Good advice. Okay. Well, if there's nothing else, then I think that will wrap things up for today. And so, I want to thank you very much for sharing your story with us.

FB: It was my pleasure.

DP: And it's my pleasure to meet you and to talk with you today.

FB: Because in the beginning, if I was talking about my parents—even now it's not a day in my life I do not think about my parents.

DP: But it's hard for you to talk about that.

FB: I had very special parents, and people in the town were like jealous, like somebody's rich and is jealous. They have it and we don't have it. They were jealous of my very wonderful parents.

DP: Wow.

FB: And not a day in my life I shall not think about my mother or father, and the rest of the family that is gone.

DP: I can understand that. Thank you very much for your time.

FB: You are welcome.

DP: All right. Other than that, we'll conclude everything, and we really appreciate your sharing your story with us.

End of interview