

This book is dedicated to a new generation of responsible radicals.

The title of the book comes from a line in a movie with Charles Bronson called *Family of Cops*, produced by a Milwaukee friend of mine, Joey Blasberg. In it, a character says, as she gets off the plane from Los Angeles, “Oh, Milwaukee, it’s so nice; you should bottle and sell it.”

I try to take Milwaukee with me everywhere I go.

I also dedicate this book to my wonderful sister Bella, who passed away during the coronavirus plague in April 2020. She will be missed by many. My first cousin Allen Porter also passed away during that time.

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Writing one's memoirs is a bit like therapy. In fact, back in 1981, I wrote a short essay "Psychotherapy and Writing" for a booklet put out by a Wisconsin writers' club called The Raconteurs and edited by Harold Hamley. So I'd first like to thank my therapists, Dr. Edward Rubin and Dr. Robert Raven, and my last therapist, Gail. (Interestingly, here, too, enters the gender issue: therapists have moved from mostly male to mostly female.)

I also thank Gerry Glazer for his insights into the old West Side of Milwaukee and, of course, John Gurda, the preeminent historian of Milwaukee, for his pioneering work. Also, my thanks go to Marc and Melanie Korman, who brought back some memories of growing up on Fiftieth Street.

I would like to thank my sister, Bella Porter Smith, her husband Mitch, and their son Aryeh for their support over the years. Of course, all of their children—Sruli, Avi, Shragai, Mindy, and their spouses—are great, but I have gotten closer to Aryeh most of all. My thanks as well to my brother, Shlomo Porter, his wife, Shushi, and their children.

Also, I should mention my Uncle Morris and Aunt Betty Porter of Los Angeles and Chicago and their son, Allen Porter, and his late wife, Sylvia, and their children—Marlon, Michelle, and Leah—as well as my other Uncle Boris and Aunt Hinda Porter of Los Angeles and their children—Sam, Abe, and Jack—and their children, especially Adam Porter. I would also like to thank my uncle Leon Puchtik and his daughter, the late Batya Levy, and her children in Israel, as well as our cousins, Idkeh Shuster (Puchtik), her late husband Jacob, her late parents, Avrum and Chava Puchtik, and her children Esti and Arik Shuster, as well as my other cousins on my mother's side, the late Yehuda Merin and his wife, Luba, and their children, Mina and Yossi, plus the George and Leila Porter family and their children of Hyannisport, Massachusetts, and all of our cousins all over the world. We may have lost twenty-five members of our family in the Shoah, but we have come roaring back with many more to replace them.

I would also like to thank my attorney and friend, Jim Kickham; my accountant and friend, the late George ("General" George) Marshall of the Jewish War Veterans, Post 211 of Newton and Brookline, Massachusetts; Ginny Audet of the Newton Free Library; and people in the Newton (Massachusetts) Genealogical Society, all of whom helped me track down information on DP camps and my passage on the SS *Marine Perch* and their manifests that "proved" that my parents and I were really on that ship to America in 1947. The Congregation in Waltham, Temple Beth Israel, receives my thanks for allowing me to use their wonderful synagogue library to write in. Surrounded by "old friends," classic Jewish books, the Morris and Ida Cantor Library was a pleasant environment.

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While writing my memoirs I came across Shaul Magid's introduction to his collection of essays *Piety and Rebellion: Essays in Hasidism* (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019), the same publisher as this book. I first met Shaul when he invited me to speak to his class at the Center for Jewish History in New York City in 2017. While his journey was more inward and spiritual, it was a journey that felt very similar to mine, always searching, always changing. I learned much from his book, and especially his introduction, which I urge people to read. It is fascinating.

And, of course, I would like to thank numerous libraries and archives, especially the Hebrew College library in Newton Centre, Massachusetts, and the staff of Robert Listernick and Harvey Sukenic; the Milwaukee County Historical Society; Jay Hyland of the Milwaukee Jewish Archives; the Wisconsin

Historical Society and Archives in Madison, Wisconsin; and Kevin Leonard, archivist at Northwestern University, my alma mater; as well as Todd Larson, my typist and editor, plus the staff at Academic Studies Press—senior editor Alessandra Anzani and marketing manager Mathew Charlton.

As I have noted, Porters spread out all over the country, some to Texas, some to Kansas, some to Missouri, some later to Chicago, and later still to LA, and some to Milwaukee. However, the first Porter to come to America was Ben Porter, and he went to a strange place. When we got letter in Yiddish from him, it came from this mysterious address, almost like one word—“Milford, Mass, Milford, Mass.” What was it? Where was it?

Again, our name was obviously not “Porter”; it was “Puchtik” and, in some cases, “Puchtig.” The word, as I noted, meant the “down” or “feathers” of a duck or most likely a goose, and it was a Ukrainian word. It meant that our ancestors were feather merchants or farmers who raised geese. Goose feathers were very common, and it took a lot of geese to fill the pillows and mattresses of the *shtetlach* (small Jewish villages) homes. I have a feather pillow I bought in Naples, Italy, and it is the softest and most comfortable pillow imaginable, but today pillows are made of rubber or other material, because, one, there is a shortage of geese, and, two, people have become allergic to feathers. Their loss. I love them, but then again, I am a “Puchtik.” The actual word is “Puch,” which almost sounds like “feathers” or “down,” and the “-tik” is a diminutive, as in “little or short feathers.”

As for my first two names: Nusia or Nosson became “Nusan” and Jacob or Yakov became “Jack.” (I was named after two deceased grandparents; see my genealogy chart in the appendix.) So “Jack Nusan Porter” became my name, and it is an unusual three-word name, which is good, because if you Google just “Jack Porter” you get a character from the TV show *Revenge*, a professional wrestler, and a dentist from Wichita, Kansas.

Ben Porter, then called Baruch Puchtik, came to America in 1907. Morris Porter, my uncle, came in 1913, so Porters started coming here over a century ago to escape the poverty and pogroms of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. Some Puchtik’s went to South America (Argentina) in the 1930s to escape Nazism. My parents waited too long and suffered through the Holocaust, only coming in 1946. By then, most of the European Puchtik’s were dead.

Beryl Porter, known as Barney, the son of Ben Porter, describes the flight he took with his father and mother from Europe to Milford, Massachusetts. (His story can be found in the Milford city library archives). Ben came first, and three years later, his son Beryl (Barney) and his wife Shaindel (Jennie Bard) came. Other sons, Joe and George, were born in America later. Interestingly, Ben

Porter got his start in the shoe business with money from the Italian gangster Lucky Luciano, but that's a story for another time.

One final note: I have written some of these essays over a long period of time, so there may be occasional repetition. But I think it adds to the integrity of the overall story, since, like *Rashomon*, one experiences different views from different people. I see this book as a pastiche, a kind of scrapbook filled with essays, articles, interviews, documents, and photos that combine to make up my wild and crazy life, and, at age seventy-five, there is still more adventure to come.

Preface

So many questions: Is it possible to be a radical Jew? What's so "radical" about Judaism? What's so "Jewish" about radicalism? They should be total opposites, but they aren't. Radicalism (which includes socialism and communism) has often been opposed to Judaism, or even to Jews, yet the majority of Jews are liberals and radical, or, in the words of Milt Himmelfarb, "Jews lie like Episcopalians but vote like Puerto Ricans." Why?

I call myself a "radical Jew," not a "Jewish radical," yet I am both, and it is confusing at times. *Radical Judaism* is what Art Green calls his book. Yet my kind of radicalism is not spiritual like Green's, but political and sociological. As a "radical Jew," I put my emphasis on being Jewish first, radical second. On the other hand, Jewish radicals—people as diverse as Leon Trotsky, Abbie Hoffman, Mark Rudd, and Allen Ginsberg—are radicals first and Jewish a very distant second (but not always; it's complicated, and sometimes they switch from being radical to being Jewish, even Orthodox Jewish). Some were self-hating Jews like Karl Marx or Leon Trotsky. Some started out as radicals but became more "Jewish" over time, like Arthur Waskow. Some find a sweet spot in-between . . . like me. Interestingly, I have been blessed to live at a time when a Jewish "radical," a socialist Jew named Bernie Sanders, came close to being nominated president of these United States of America!

I'm not a liberal, and I'm not a conservative. I am what they call a "progressive," a term Communists used when "communism" was too dangerous a word. But basically I'm a "progressive," or, better yet, a "democratic socialist." Bernie Sanders single-handedly made it okay to talk about socialism with his campaigns in 2016 and 2020.

But who exactly am I? That is harder to define and seems to shift all the time. As Daniel Bell said about himself, I am a radical when it comes to foreign policy, a liberal on social issues, and a conservative on fiscal (money) issues. But that still does not define me very well, because I became, after reading Elizabeth Warren's books, more radical about money matters (like bankruptcy, credit cards, and the power banks have).

In fact, I ran for U.S. Congress in 2012 in the Massachusetts 12th District on exactly that platform. I lost, but it was a fun ride. Not surprisingly, it was Barney Frank's old seat and was won by Joe Kennedy III. (The *New Yorker* did a profile on me on April 19, 2012, about that race, and the profile is in this memoir.)

I would say I am a combination of Barney Frank, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren. Some would say this is a cop-out, that one should be a radical on all three issues: foreign, domestic, and fiscal. Maybe I've changed a bit and moved to the center. For example, while I loved Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, I supported Joe Biden for the presidency in 2020, as I felt that he would be the only one who could beat Trump. Some may call that a cop-out, but I have become a little more practical as I've got older.

Extremes at either end usually lose. Still, if Elizabeth Warren or Bernie Sanders or Pete Buttigieg had received the nomination, I would have supported any one of them. Things move so fast as I write this (February 24, 2020) that, while I shifted to Bernie and Amy Klobuchar, it looks like Joe Biden, a moderate, has overtaken both Bernie Sanders and Liz Warren and will be the Democratic nominee to oppose Donald Trump.

Who were my influences?

First, Morris U. Schappes. If any person personified the "perfect" Jewish radical, it would be Morrie, longtime editor of *Jewish Currents*. A former Communist, Morrie spent time in Dannemora Prison in upstate New York, arrested after losing his teaching job. He once told me a poignant story about being shackled to an African American on a train going up to the prison. The man was squirming all night long. When asked what the problem was, the man said he had to go to the bathroom and would have to "expose" himself to a white man. Such was the racial impact at the time. I never forgot that story. Morrie was a handsome, erudite, and dignified man who never lowered himself to anger or bitterness. He always told me: answer them with scientific and historical fact, not emotion.

Second, Habonim/Dror—Left, Socialist, and Labor Zionist—people like Label Fein, Ilana Berner, Assaf Alterman, Tzvika Gurion, Moshe Kerem, Muki Tzur; kibbutz leaders like Amnon Hadary and Mickey Duvdevani, and later *Machon* leaders like Haim Avni; or *madrichim* in Milwaukee like Lorna and Harry Kniaz; or my leaders at Habonim/Dror Camp Tavor in Three Rivers, Michigan, like Berl Post and Ivan and Malke Frank; or people of my age/generation who influenced me: David Twersky, Al Barland, Danny Kutnick, and Peter Braun—*chalutzim*, all of them.

For some reason these were mostly men, and straight men. Ironically the only woman in Habonim who influenced me was a lesbian, Ilana Berner, who of course was in the closet in the 1950s and 1960s when she was our *madricha*. No openly gay person could have been a *madrich* in *Habonim* in those days. But times have changed radically.

And, of course, we read such Socialist/Zionist thinkers as Ber Borochov, Nachman Syrkin, A. D. Gordon, and later Moshe Kerem and Max Langer. Our heroes were David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, Yitzhak Rabin, Yigal Allon, and Moshe Dayan. See Gil Troy's book *The Zionist Ideas* for others, as well as Arthur Hertzberg's classic book *The Zionist Idea* (which deeply influenced me, and also influenced Troy's book), along with Moshe Kerem's book (Murray Weingarten of *Kibbutz Gesher Haziv*) *The Kibbutz Idea*, long out of print.

Later in the 1960s I was influenced by the Chicago Seven (or Eight, if you include Bobby Seale), people like Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, Tom Hayden, Lee Weiner (who was my graduate schoolmate), and David Dellinger. Arthur Waskow, the Jews for Urban Justice, Breira, the New Jewish Agenda, and many of the people in my now-classic book *Jewish Radicalism* also impacted my thinking—but not Michael Lerner's "politics of meaning," which I found meaningless, so to speak, and filled with psychobabble.

Third, Hasidism. I was influenced by the Hasidic leader in Milwaukee, Rabbi Jacob Twerski, and his sons, especially Michel and his wife Faygeh, and his brothers, Shia (Joshua) and Mottel, as well as Rabbi David Shapiro and Rabbi Isaac Lerer. And also—and they might not believe this—by my brother and sister. I may have rebelled against Orthodox Judaism, but inside me is *das pintelle yid* (that tiny bit of Judaism) that prizes spirituality and closeness to God. I am neither an atheist nor an agnostic. I believe in *Hashem*, one God. I may have some doubts, but mostly I have faith, *emunah*.

In the late 1960s and 1970s, I was also influenced by a trove of sociologists at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee—Irwin Rinder, Lakshmi Bharawaj, Karl Flaming, Hugo Engelmann, Don Weast; and Northwestern University—Howie Becker (along with Erving Goffman), Bernie Beck, Richard Schwartz, Janet Abu-Lughod, Jack Sawyer, and the entire school of participant observation,

deviance, and concern for the underdog that they taught us back then. Today, very few sociologists of Jewry do this kind of research, with the exception of Samuel Heilman and some anthropologists; the field of Jewish studies today is dominated by mass survey analysis. I guess that is what the Jewish community wants, not in-depth analysis of Jews in prisons or on opiates.

I organized my second book on Jewish life (my first was *Jewish Radicalism*, which came out in 1973), called *The Sociology of American Jews: A Critical Anthology*, in 1978. Marshall Sklare, the dean of contemporary Jewry, told me that it was the first time that the words “Sociology of Jews” were used in a title. That anthology is still relevant today. Here are the titles of some essays from the book: “*Die Yiddische Arbeters*,” “Democracy in Jewish Life,” “Vietnam and the Jews,” and “Is Zionism Dead?” I should also add such historians as Louis Ruchames and Howard Zinn; they had an influence on me, as well as former progressives like John Allschuung and the Raconteur’s Writers’ Club of Milwaukee.

But in the mid-to-late 1970s, I shifted my research from mainstream sociology to the Holocaust and then comparative genocide. Why? That’s a painful question. Maybe sociology left me; I didn’t leave it. I just did not find it very exciting anymore. Too many statistics and mass surveys, too much “sociologese,” too much jargon, and especially too much political correctness all drove me from my original field, plus my books on Jews were not getting very good reviews in mainstream sociology journals like *Contemporary Sociology*.

So I made my mark in genocide studies—and, ironically, I was influenced by a host of female and marginalized scholars like Helen Fein, the most prominent sociologist of genocide, but also by Celia Heller, Joyce Apsel, and one who wrote about Jewish partisan resistance, Vera Laska. Why are there so many women in early Holocaust and genocide studies, yet so few in mainstream sociology? Maybe because Holocaust and genocide studies were new fields, less traveled, and less prestigious than mainstream areas like theory and methods, so women could make a mark in them. It’s an interesting question to ponder—this gender issue—and beyond this short preface.

Arnie Eisen, in his Marshall Sklare Award speech in 2016, discussed the three-legged stool that Jewish studies stood on: Israel, God, and Torah. I rarely wrote or even thought about these three things, but as I enter that last third of my life, I am thinking more and more about them.

I joined a traditional Sephardic *shul*. The people are very warm and welcoming. They are who they are. They don’t try to “convert” me, but they accept me as I am and try to get me to go one step further. I go to synagogue nearly every *Shabbat*, and I *lay tefillin*. Now that’s a radical Jew for you! My parents would be very

proud of me, and definitely my brother, an Orthodox rabbi in Baltimore, and my sister, a modern Orthodox woman, and her husband Mitch and their children, especially Aryeh Smith, their son, are proud of me. I thank Avi Sharouz, his wife Deena, and their kids, plus Dr. David Sheena and others, for welcoming me into the *shul*. I have finally found a spiritual home. It's not perfect—no place is—but it is home.

But what about my children and grandchildren? I love them dearly, but while my two kids (Gabe and Danielle) will remain Jewish, I fear for my grandchildren. How Jewish will they be? That is the big question that all of us sociologists of Jewry grapple with, and the future does not look good, but we will see. (I'll pay for the Hebrew school lessons.)

Who am I, and can I “duplicate” myself? That is, are there others like me in the next generation? And if mine is a form of secular Judaism, does secular Judaism have a future?

Still, *das pintelle yid*, that tiny spark of Jewishness, as the *rabbanim* say, will always sprout upward out of the sidewalk.

Am Yisroel Chai!

Part One

1946–1963—
COMING TO
AMERICA

Chapter 1

From Maniewiczze to Milwaukee—the Making of a Writer/Activist

The Shoah

I have written extensively about the Shoah, the Holocaust, and its impact on my parents, Irving and Faye Porter. So I will move from the actual Shoah experience of the killings of my family—twenty-five members killed in Maniewiczze, Poland, by Einsatzgruppe B—to our leaving Russia and coming to America. But I urge the reader to see the list of my writings in the sources section. Still, I include some rare interviews I had with my parents before they died. It sheds light on what forces formed me later.

Interviews with Jewish Partisans: My Mother and Father

Zalonka: An Interview with a Jewish Partisan Leader

This is an interview with a Jewish partisan leader, my father. Most interviews are carried out with people whom you don't know and with whom it is fairly easy to be objective. However, when you interview your father and when you talk about

the destruction of your sisters (daughters) or uncles (brothers), all objectivity is thrown out the window.

It becomes a chronicle of tears and a necessary but painful task. This article is an edited version of an interview that lasted nearly four hours and took place in the living room of our home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Several times I had to stop the tape recorder when my father and I broke down into tears. Yet the chronicle continued, because he understood how important it was that people, especially young people, know the true story of Jewish resistance during World War II. It was a story that I had to know. As his son, as a young Jew in America, and as a young adult living in this post-Holocaust era, I, too, had to know.

There are so many myths, falsehoods, and half-truths associated with the Holocaust. One of the most arrogant of these lies is that *all* Jews were cowards and that they *all* walked passively to their deaths.

Raul Hilberg, in his book *The Destruction of the European Jews*, arrived at the conclusion that “the reaction pattern of the Jews was characterized by the almost complete lack of resistance.” Hannah Arendt, in her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, described Jewish resistance as “pitifully small, incredibly weak and essentially harmless.” Psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim, in *The Informed Heart*, pleadingly asked, “Did no one of those destined to die fight back? Did none of them wish to die not by giving in but by asserting themselves in attacking the SS Nazis? Only a very few did.”

The myths continue, but what is the truth? Bettelheim says the resisters were “very few” in number. Arendt calls this resistance “pitifully small” and “essentially harmless.”

Yet it was these “very few” who, in the Warsaw Ghetto, held off General Jurgen Stroop and his command of one thousand SS tank grenadiers, one thousand men of the SS cavalry, plus two units of artillery for over two months in the spring of 1943, with only a few guns, hand grenades, Molotov cocktails, and plenty of Jewish guts.

It was this “essentially harmless” nature of Jewish resistance that forced even Goebbels to admit that “now we know what Jews can do if they have arms.”

It was this number of over twenty thousand Jewish partisans who fought in the forests and mountains—of Poland, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, France, Greece, Belgium, and Italy. Some of them formed autonomous Jewish national units—Jewish partisans led by Jewish commanders. However, most of the partisan bands were mixed groups wherein Jews fought alongside Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Frenchmen, Italians, or others.

Of the twenty thousand or so partisans, there were at least ten thousand survivors. My father was one of them. Irving Porter (Yisrael Puchtik), called

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