

Paulette Oppert Fink/CHGS

Paulette Fink, member of French Resistance, dies at 93

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Francelyne Lurie believes that everyone is born with the capacity to commit heroic deeds — the circumstances only need arise for that potential to come to the surface. Or at least that's how she explains the sacrifice and selflessness exhibited during and after World War II by her mother, Paulette Oppert Fink, who died at the age of 93 on April 2.

"It's circumstances," stated Lurie. "It either presents itself or it doesn't."

For Fink, those circumstances were presented to her as a young woman in France, when the Nazis rose to power. She and her husband, Lt. Yves Oppert, went underground and joined the French Resistance. Fink hid Jewish children, and after the war, started an orphanage for children whose parents were killed in concentration camps.

One orphanage turned into three, eventually giving refuge to 1,500 children. She raised funds for the orphanages herself by speaking in the U.S. Fink also worked on a refugee ship taking Jews to then-Palestine, supported the building of Israel, became a charismatic speaker raising money for needy Jews — especially Holocaust survivors — and devoted herself to other Jewish charities.

What makes her story even more remarkable is that she managed to do all of this in the shadow of a devastating event in her own life — the capture and execution of her husband, Lt. Oppert, three weeks before the Allies liberated France.

"She did really, above and beyond" what she needed to do, said Lurie, who lives in Wayzata. "She could have quit after the war."

But Fink didn't quit, which, besides aiding her fellow Jews, also began the turn of events that brought this Parisian socialite turned Resistance fighter to, of all places, Minnesota.

After she began fundraising for the orphanages, it became evident that she had a natural talent for giving moving speeches.

"She was one of the first...women, for sure, to come and speak about the war and the Holocaust. There were huge rumors swirling around but she spoke to [her audiences] in a manner that, they weren't going to leave a penny in their bank accounts — they were going to give it all to her," Lurie said. Fink spoke around the world on behalf of Israel and other Jewish causes.

In her heavy French accent, she "mesmerized people...she yelled and screamed, and when she had to be gentle, she was gentle. It was as if she was showing them a movie of what she wanted to them to see," Lurie explained.

Among the many people Fink made an impression upon was I.D. Fink of Minneapolis, who founded G&K Services, an industrial dry cleaner. They were married in 1954, and she made her home here with her two daughters.

While in Minneapolis, she was national chairwoman of the United Jewish Appeal – Women's Division, and was also involved in Minneapolis Hadassah and the Hillel Foundation at the University of Minnesota.

After spending many winters in Palm Springs, Calif., Fink moved there in 1999.

Lurie believes that her mother's legacy will live on through the people who heard her speak and the generations that follow them and hear those same stories and continue to pass them on.

Lurie recalled how, after Fink spoke to Sigma Delta Tau, the Jewish sorority at the University of Minnesota, in the 1960s, the women who heard her speak all became involved in the Jewish community. Many years later she returned to speak to the daughters of those women. Lurie foresees the young women passing on what they learned from her mother to the generations following them, thus continuing the lessons Fink originally shared.

Fink is survived by another daughter, Nadine Bicher of Boston, her husband George and their two sons; Lurie's husband Richard and their six children; and 14 great-grandchildren.

There will be a memorial service for Paulette Oppert Fink 7 p.m. Tuesday, May 3 at Adath Jeshurun Congregation. It will begin with a Ma'ariv service with Rabbi Harold Kravitz and Cantor Scott Buckner.