

**LINE FIVE: THE INTERNAL PASSPORT**  
**The Soviet Jewish Oral History Project of the Women's Auxiliary**  
**of the Jewish Community Centers of Chicago**

**TSILYA MICHLIN GOLDIN**

**Matriarch**

BIRTH: October 10, 1908, near Bobroysk,

SPOUSE: Mendel Goldin, supervised woodworking plant.  
Born in Gomel, 1899, deceased 1970  
Married in 1930

CHILDREN: Fira Goldin, 1932, resides in Haifa  
Clara Estrina, born 1938, Gomel, deceased 1975  
Raisa Krugman, born 1941, Gomel, resides Chicago

PARENTS: Zelig Michlin, 1876 - 1945  
Genya Simkina, 1880 - 1950

SIBLINGS: Seven, names not recorded

GRANDCHILDREN:

Galina Goldin, b. 1952, married Vladimir Jhuravsky,  
resides in Israel. Children: Rostislav  
Jhuravsky, born 1975; Svetlana Jhuravsky, b.  
1979.

Sofia Goldin, b. 1959, married Mikhail Shifrin, resides  
in Israel. Children: Dimitri, b. 1982

Yanana Estrin, married Kim (Katzrina) Nayman, resides  
Chicago.

Mikhail Estrin, resides in Gomel

Raisa married Yefim Krugman. Children: Julian, b.  
1963, Gomel, resides in Chicago. Mikhail, b.  
1973, Gomel.

JEWISH ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS (IF GIVEN):

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Women's Auxiliary of the Jewish Community Centers of  
Chicago

NAME: TSILYA MICHLIN GOLDIN

DATE: August 8, 1990

INTERVIEWER: Elaine Snyderman

TRANSLATOR: Julian Krugman, Grandson

(Please tell me what your earliest memories are. What  
city, or town, did you grow up in?)

I grew up in Gomel, Byelorussia. We had eight  
children in our family, originally there were ten but two  
died. My father was a *schochet*, there was never enough  
money. He also did circumcisions for newborn boys.

(How many Jewish people were there in Gomel when  
you were growing up?) I don't know. There were a lot of  
Jewish families. Maybe a third of the people were Jewish.

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(How did the Russian neighbors get along with the Jews of Gomel?) Russian and Jews lived quietly, but if something went wrong the Jews were always guilty. (Do you remember anything specific?) There were a lot of Jewish schools in 1900, but in 1925 the government closed them. The Jews went there to study Yiddish and the Jewish language, and the non-Jewish people laughed at Jews when they spoke Yiddish. And because of that the Jewish stopped giving their children Jewish names and they began to lose their culture. This was not the main reason. The main reason for stopping the Jewish culture was that of government policy.

(Now your father did some circumcisions, they outlawed that, did he continue to do this for the Jewish boys?) Yes. He was very, very religious and they couldn't stop him from doing this. Even after he was arrested and then came back home, he continued to do this. They couldn't prove anything against him, because they couldn't find his tools, so he was in jail about ten days, or two weeks.

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He did this without people knowing. He did this until 1941.

(What do you remember of your childhood, what was it like when you were growing up?)

It was a big family, a poor family, and I was the oldest girl. There was one older brother. And that brother studied and was a religious Jew.

I didn't have a chance to study at school and couldn't attend a Russian University but my youngest brothers and sisters attended school and studied. The first year after the October Revolution, they couldn't attend Russian schools, but then in ten years they went to the schools.

(What do you remember about the changes that were going on around you, because of the politics? Did your parents talk about politics?)

I am afraid that I was out of touch. My parents knew the synagogue and the family and how to pray, but not much else.

(What happened in Gomel after the Revolution?)

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I don't remember much, I was young. There was a Civil War and Polish occupation and during these times a lot of Jews fled and hid in the forests. We hid in the forests, and lived under ground. This went on from 1918, until 1922, for four years. There was a lot of danger and first there was a German occupation, then Polish occupation and then Germans again.

(Did you get to practice any of the Jewish traditions, weddings, *b'rith*, funerals, during the Civil War?)

Gomel was traditional and the Jewish people tried to fulfill the traditions and rituals. Then they stopped doing it. It was prohibited to participate in religious observances or celebrations.

(Were you introduced to your husband before your marriage or did you meet each other and decide to get married?)

I introduced myself! When we met I was twenty and he was thirty. (Were you from the same town?) No. I grew up in Bobroysk and he was from Gomel. (So when you got married you moved to your husband's town.) Yes, we were married in 1930.

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(As a young person, did you have any ambition to do something that required an education? Was there something that appealed to you, even though you couldn't do it?)

There was education. I would have liked to have continued my education but couldn't because I didn't finish Primary School so I couldn't continue my education. (What was the reason you were not permitted to finish school was because of your father's work? Was he considered a *bourgeois*? He was making money for himself and his family, was this the reason you was not permitted to continue your education?)

No, it was because my father was religious and, in addition, he was a Jew. The children were denied public school because both parents were still observant Jews. Jewish schools were closed. Then we were denied from Soviet schools because of my father's practices. They knew that he wouldn't stop his religious practices.

(If you could have continued through school, do you have an idea of what you would have liked to do?)

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I wanted to study and be proficient in something and then maybe to teach this. I wanted to be something like a tailor, to work with clothing. I couldn't get into a professional school and my family could not afford to bring in someone who could teach me in private. It was a big family.

(After the Civil War, when you were about fourteen, there were about eight years before you got married, what did you do then?)

My mother had a poor heart and was ill so I took on many of the responsibilities in the house. During the Polish occupation my older brother was shot and, because of that, my mother became ill. My brother did not die, but he couldn't work. The bullet went through the side of his face and everyone thought that he was killed, but he didn't die. (What was the effect on him after that?) He recovered, and he could even still speak. He was just twenty years old.

(Who was the first in the family to get married?) This same older brother. He was also a *schochet*. He could not do this kind of work after everything religious was

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prohibited. He became a kind of salesman. He worked, though, in a store in Gomel.

(Did you have a religious wedding? what was it like?)

We had a religious wedding in a synagogue but nobody was to know about it. (Who came?) My uncle and I, several people who were very religious. My parents were not there. No, we had no party or celebration afterwards. This was in 1930 and there was not much money to spend.

(Do you remember what you wore at your wedding?) It was just a regular dress. I made it myself. After that, my sisters had the civil marriage according to the Soviet laws. (What would have happened if they had caught you in a religious wedding ceremony?) My husband and everyone there would have lost their jobs.

(Did the younger children in your family get to have an education later on?) My youngest brothers got to finish the high school and some of the boys got higher education.

(Do you remember your own grandparents?) No, I don't remember them at all. My grandfather was a soldier for



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twenty-five years in the King's army. He was twelve years old when they put him in the army. He was thirty when he came out of the army.

(So that was eighteen years? It is still a long time.) (Why did he not convert the way they wanted these young boys to?) They tried to make him, but he refused. He said he was Jewish. It is family history that one day he was in a military parade and the Czar noticed him and tried to make him a Christian.

(What did he do when he got out of the army?) I don't know what he did, but one of his sons and two daughters, Golda and Masya, emigrated in 1921 to New York. He was a doctor, so he would be Dr. Irvin (Icha) Michlin. Yes, his son was a doctor too. We looked but we couldn't find them. We even wrote the American Red Cross, because we think they still spell the name the same way. We got a picture and on the back somebody had written the names. We did not hear from them often because it was dangerous for us to write or to get such mail from America.

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This was my uncle and my cousin, they were both doctors, and my two aunts. In 1969, the cousin came to Minsk, we lived in Gomel, in a little town and they could not get there. (Perhaps we can trace them through the American Medical Association.) He was very famous and his wife was a movie star, according to family legend.

(What was life like for you in the years before World War II?) I had a hard life. I had three young girls. I remember some other children were born dead. My husband was always out working, and I had to look after the family. I kept a garden for food for the family. I also kept chickens for eggs and meat for us.

(Were the children born in a hospital?) Yes. But in the Forties, we were relocated to Uzbekistan.

(So, in 1941, you and the three children, went by train to Uzbekistan.) Not only by train - by walking, by car. The baby was three months old. When we traveled by train, the German airplanes bombed the train. The train was able to continue but it was frightening.

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We lived for four years in Uzbekistan. We lived in a rural area, in a village, and we worked to get some money. We worked in the cotton fields, and there was no money, or food, just cotton.

When I had to go picking cotton, the children were with my mother, who was there too. There was a lot of sickness, and malaria was very common. It was a barracks, with a lot of people and children living in it. There was no bread and not much else to eat. One kilogram bread would cost 150 rubles. Officials distributed the bread, one-half kilo for worker and one hundred grams for children. A lot of people killed themselves because they couldn't stand the conditions. The government needed the cotton for the army but the people who worked in the fields had nothing. The soil was so poor that only cotton could grow there, not any vegetables.

Just about every family there lost a member of the family: a child, a parent, a brother. Conditions were very hard. Both my parents were there with me. My father died after the war. We came back right after the war to Gomel. Most people ended up bloated from malnutrition.

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(What did you do differently that kept your children alive?) I was very young and very strong then. My husband, when he was a soldier, could save some money and send it to me and my husband's brother would help. But almost all the children were bloated from malnutrition. I, too, was bloated from malnutrition.

I had four pregnancies, but the second child died. That was in 1935.

(So you and your husband were reunited after the war?) After the war he came home very sick. He was in the army during the war and he served on the railroads. He worked to make bridges explode, so the others could not use the bridges afterwards. He worked with explosives. I think it was like a special group that would go into occupied territory and explode bridges and roads and then come back.

Everything during the War was dangerous.

Then, when we came back from Uzbekistan we found that our house had been blown up and we didn't have any place to

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live. There were a lot of people with the same problem. We all ended up living in the kitchen of a house. We were on the ground floor and we had a blanket over the door and winter in Russia was very, very cold. We didn't have food nor an apartment. (Daughter Raisa: And I broke my leg and had to stay in the hospital and we had no food and no money. And our father was very sick.)

My sister helped me to buy a cow and with that we survived. We had milk, but we had no food, no clothes, and my husband was very sick. When my husband recovered, he began to work.

(What kind of work did he do then, after the war?)

He returned to his former job as foreman in the wood-working factory. (What did they produce?) They produced small articles, also a rosin that was used for violins. He had worked there for thirty years and after the war he had to walk about six miles to get to the factory. Then they gave him a horse so he could ride. Before that he walked this every day in all weather. The factory also made sealing wax.

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I can't remember that there was ever an easy time in my life, even after the war.

(Did you every get another place, where you didn't live just in a kitchen?)

In five years, we moved into our former home but there was one more family in this home. And our family got just one room which was five people in one room - this room was living room, bed room, kitchen, dining room, everything. We lived in this one room for many, many years. One big room, maybe ...

(For washing clothes, taking a bath, or toilet facilities, what did you use?) Toilet facilities were outside. We washed and cooked and slept in one place. Twenty-four square meters was the size of this room.

(How did the family get along in these conditions? Were there arguments?) Before the war, the whole house was ours. But when we returned from Uzbekistan we only had one room. The people who lived in the rest of the house were the people who helped us rebuild the house. We did not have much money to spend for this rebuilding and they

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helped rebuild. We did most of the work but they took the rest of the house and gave us just one room. They were Jewish people, they had four children in their family, six people, including mother and father. There were two boys and two girls in their family and the husband was handicapped, he was shot in the war. He worked in a clothing factory after the war, and he got some benefits because he lost a leg in the war.

(Did the two families get along together, or were there some problems?) (Raisa: There were some big problems. They cheated us. They promised us half of the house and then gave us only one room and all my life I remember that my mother cried and it was not friendly.)

(In your own family, how did you all get along, was it peaceful, or were there quarrels.) (Raisa: Our family got along well. The oldest sister, Fira, was very nice and helpful with all the children.)

The younger children were very smart and she helped teach them. She trained, and studied and she was a school

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teacher for high school. My second daughter, Clara, finished high school and was awarded a Gold medal for excellence in study. Then she finished the Leningrad University of the Food Industry.

(RAISA: My oldest sister was a music teacher, and I too was a music teacher. I conducted a choir and I played the piano and I worked as a music teacher. My mother could get no education and she pushed her children to get a good education. My mother was not really musical, that I know, but she did sing to us when we were little. I play the piano.)

(Was there a piano in your tiny, little house when you were growing up?) (RAISA: Yes, after the war, my mother bought a piano. This piano was brought from Germany and it was an old piano. Soviet soldiers brought the piano from Germany. She bought it and paid for it. In 1955, ten years after the war. Our father was able to go to work then, and we had a little money.)

(Did you see the piano and buy it for your daughter? Or did your daughter ask for the piano?) It was my dream



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to have the piano for my daughter. I felt it was good for their education. (When I asked you before, what you wanted to be, you said a tailor but I think you really liked music!) My daughter had a very good voice, and the music professions are part of education and I felt it would be good for them to have this background. (When you were young, did you think you would like to become a musician or singer?) I couldn't be. So -- For the girls I sang but I never considered this. (RAISA: my middle sister played the cello and my oldest sister plays the violin. My oldest sister is about ten years older than me and then she got married and moved to another town. When I grew up, she was already gone. She majored in literature, with music as a sideline. They are now in Israel. She dreamt of becoming a journalist and ---. But her interest was in people and in Russia she could not be a journalist. Jews could not.)

(What did you do in the household that was Jewish, besides just remember you were Jews, did you keep Kosher?) Oh, I could not. We had no kosher meat in our town. On Pesach, we could not even get Matzo in stores. There was no way we could observe the laws. Some people went to big towns and bought matzo and brought it back to sell to us

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for much money. Before, in our town, we got meat from a *schochet* who came from another town. I remember we stood in big lines to get a chicken. And then this old man died. Then there was no one who could cut a Kosher chicken. He died in about 1975 or so. So we would have no meat on the table at Pesach, only vegetables and fruit.

(When were you able to get Matzo.)

Some people in another town illegally made matzo and we were able to get it. We could get them most years, but not all years. Some people even made the matzo, illegally, at night, in their own homes and they distributed some to the other Jews.

(What is your philosophy of life? What kept you going, what was in your mind, so that you didn't give up?)

My main concern was the family, the children. And the hope that for them things will be better. The hope that they will have a better life than I did.

**TSILYA MICHLIN GOLDIN, PART II**

**DATE:** August 29, 1990

**INTERVIEWER:** Elaine Snyderman

**Tsilya Michlin Goldin**

**TRANSLATOR:** Henrietta Williams

**NOTE:** Also present were Mrs. Goldin's son-in-law, Yefim Krugman, and Sharon Rowe, project member.

I was born in Bobroysk. There were eight children, three brothers and five sisters. Originally there were ten but two died.

My father was very religious. He didn't take money when he acted as a *mohel* to perform the ritual circumcision. He did it as a *mitzvoh*, a good deed. If accidentally a child wasn't circumcised by four years of age, it would be a difficult operation. My father didn't have medical training; he didn't study medicine.

I remember how my mother would cry when father left at night. The parents would leave the child to be circumcised and my father would go out the door because to be caught would mean ten years in prison. It was dangerous to do this in the 1930's and the government was persecuting people who did it. My mother used to cry all the time and begged my father not to go and do this for other families

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because it was so dangerous. He could get ten years imprisonment for doing circumcisions but he did it for his religion; he did it for his people. I don't know exactly, but it seemed half the people living in Bobroysk at that time were Jews.

(You said the Jews and their Russian neighbors lived peacefully until something went wrong, then the Jews were blamed.) I just recall *pogroms* in 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923. My father went outside once in silk attire, in holiday clothes. He was going somewhere and then realized bandits were approaching the town, so he went to a place where people were building a house. He sat there as if he were part of the crew. Somebody pointed out that he was a Jew.

He was undressed completely and beaten so severely that he spent two years in bed. His ribs were broken and his whole body was severely injured. My mother was also injured because the men came to the house. The other children and I (I was twelve years old then) hid out in a tent with my older brother, who was a *schochet* by then. We stayed near the hospital because we were afraid to be with anybody else. We saw people brought in without arms,

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without legs, with noses and ears cut off. These were all Jews, after *pogroms*. Up to that time we lived in a *shtetl* outside of Bobroysk but because of the *pogroms* we moved to Bobroysk.

My father continued to risk his life and perform circumcisions. The family remained in Bobroysk until 1941. By then I lived in Gomel. My whole family came to Gomel and everyone evacuated to Uzbekistan.

I don't remember exactly when but some time between 1936 and 1938 my father was imprisoned for performing the religious rituals. He was persecuted for being a *schochet*. A few times the Russian (*Nyta*) police tried to arrest him. Once when my younger brother lived with his family in a different house, he came to him after *shabbos* at eleven o'clock or midnight, somebody else brought the animal and he proceeded with the ritual slaughter. Someone told the police what was going on and they arrived and began a very severe search, turning the house upside down. What father did -- when the officer in charge of the search sat in a chair -- my father took the jacket he used to protect his clothes when he was slaughtering the animal and put his

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instruments, scissors and knife, into the pocket and put the jacket where the policeman was sitting. Meanwhile they turned the house upside from Midnight until eight o'clock in the morning and didn't find anything.

Father kept saying, "I didn't do it. Maybe someone else did it. When I got here, everything was done. I really didn't do it." They could not find the instruments because the officer in charge was sitting in the chair on which my father put his jacket. They could not find any evidence. This I remember very well. My recollection of this is vivid.

(How would you describe your family home?) The house was pretty big, a wooden house, one of the most beautiful houses there. There were five rooms. There were ten children, parents, grandmother and quite often we had visitors from different places around because my father was considered very learned. He was a very respected man. There were a lot of people who would consult with him over certain religious rituals, prayers or circumcisions or whatever, and my father was always available to assist and support. Doing ritual slaughtering was his job.

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When I came to Gomel, I came to look for a job. I couldn't find work in Bobroysk because I was the daughter of a *schochet* and those were the years after the revolution when religious people were persecuted and their children were not allowed to go to school. Right after the Revolution my older brothers were allowed to go to a Jewish-Yiddish school which the government allowed then. Then those schools were closed and I had no place to go. My younger sisters were able to go to school years later but I was the wrong age, right in the middle, and could not. So, I went to Gomel to my mother's sister thinking I would be able to find a job.

I met my future husband, Mendel Goldin, at my aunt's house. He was a very distant relative on my uncle's side.

I went to Gomel; they were going to try to set me up with some kind of work because in our city I couldn't make any money. It is not far, maybe three hours by train from Bobroysk. So, I arrived and spent a month, maybe three weeks there looking for work. To make a long story short, he came to visit his distant relatives and we met there at

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my aunt's home. I was happy. He was very young and handsome and interesting and nice. And you know the Jewish law, a Jewish boy is dearer than a girl because after his parents' death for all the rest of his life he prays, says *Kaddish* on the anniversary of their death.

(What happened to you when the war started?) While we escaped to Uzbekistan, Mendel was serving near Leningrad during the blockade. He went into the army from the very first days. Five years he was there... Right after the war he came home very, very sick. He was not tortured; it was not an injury related to the war but in crossing the river something happened to him. He developed a skin disease. His skin was peeling off. The conditions they lived in, they didn't take their clothes off for months and months, nor did they bathe or eat properly. It was probably from that. There were a lot of people who died not because of bombs or mines but because of disease. He was in his forties at the time the war started. He was born in 1899.



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I carried three children and another which was still-born. My children were all born before the war, the youngest in 1941.

My father died of starvation after the war. Everything was busy, full. We arrived in Gomel in cattle cars three months before the war was ended in 1945, but we left Uzbekistan in 1944. It took us almost a year to make the journey back. It was winter when we got there. We travelled back with my sister's family; she had three children. My sister became very sick with a temperature of 104 degrees. We left her in Moscow because they couldn't figure out what kind of disease she had. Her three children and, in all, ten people in our family were left in my care. When I came back to Gomel, it was a very hard time and my house was ruined.

All of us occupied the kitchen of a house and it was very cold. It was always frozen. We had a blanket over the doorway. The blanket took the place of a door because there wasn't any door. My father died in 1945 during this terribly cold winter, sitting in the kitchen without any food, on the cold stove. He just collapsed and died of

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starvation. My sister eventually got well and returned.  
My father was buried in Gomel.

(Where did you get your strength?) I derived my strength from my love of my children and the family. I just wanted to keep them together. What made matters worse is that the people I hired to rebuild my house did so, but then kept it for themselves. (As explained in the first interview.) Then four people lived in one room until 1982; almost forty year. Our older daughter was married in 1952. Our house was demolished in 1982 and I got a very nice apartment and I lived the way we lived before the war for the six years before we left the country. I lived there by myself in two rooms.

Mendel died in 1970, having worked until 1965. When he came back from the war, he did not work for one year. He was a foreman in charge of a group of people who made things out of lumber camp by-products: sealing wax, rosin. He couldn't do manual labor.

(How did you acquire the piano?) My fifteen-year old daughter went where my sister was in Bobroysk to buy a used

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piano for 2,000 rubles. (Yefim estimated this was about \$30.00 in today's money.) It was a lot of money at that time but not any extraordinary sum - just a lot for a family where the husband had been sick in bed for a year.

I felt horrible because I was left illiterate and couldn't do much, those years were horrible. I didn't have any work. My sister paid for the piano and I gradually, over time, paid her back. My sister also helped us buy a cow so the children would have milk. The piano came from Germany, brought back by people who probably took it from an abandoned home. Many people brought things back that way.

When the children grew up it got a little easier for us. Fira went to work every day. I was already helping out a little, we had a big garden. And the children started to study, to get a higher education.

Fira studied music; she had a beautiful voice. So she set off for Minsk and, as she was a Jew, it was difficult for her but she finished her studies anyway. The middle daughter, Clara, set off for Leningrad and learned in the

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University. She also learned to sew. She finished her studies with gold medals. She was very capable, and she worked very hard. She died when she was thirty-seven years old. She died "under the knife." The doctor was guilty in her death.

(Would it have been better not to be Jewish?) If we hadn't been Jewish, obviously life would have been easier. My children were very talented. They always wanted to go to the university and wanted to go on for advanced degrees. They wanted to study and be learned people. (If you had a choice to be Jewish or not Jewish, would you choose not to be?) No. I am from a very religious family and I do believe in following Jewish law. Unfortunately I could not pass this on to my children because it was persecuted. It was laughed at. It causes me much pain that my forty-nine year old daughter cannot say a word in Hebrew or Yiddish. She understands everything but cannot speak it. My husband and I always spoke Yiddish but the children couldn't because they were scared, scared about being persecuted. I am Jewish because I was born that way and that is the way it should be. I am from a very religious family.

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I think that Jews should continue to be Jewish and try very hard to follow Jewish law, to study as much as they can. My grandson, Mikhail, went to Jewish school last year and at the age of sixteen, willingly, by himself, wanted to be circumcised because he wanted to be a Jew. I was surprised that this young boy made this decision. He doesn't know any Jewish words but he has a Jewish heart. I was very worried about him during the surgical procedure. I was afraid that something might go wrong, but everything went well.