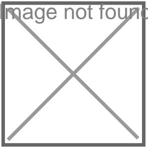


Galina Nizhnikov Transcript

Judith Rosenbaum: Let me begin by introducing us to the recorder just so we have the information on here. Today is January 12, 2003, and I'm here in Peabody with Galina Niznikov, and the interview is being conducted by Judith Rosenbaum. So maybe we'll start with your family background if you could tell me a little bit about when and where you were born and your family as you were being raised?

Galina Nizhnikov: I was born in Moscow in Russia, in 1940.

JR: Is it hard to think back about it and remember?

GN: No, I was just the last child that was born in our family.

JR: It's okay. Take whatever time you need.

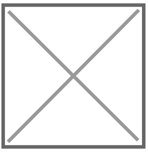
GN: And the only daughter.

JR: How many children were there?

GN: I have three brothers, who are older than I, and my parents, as I understood, wanted to have a girl.

JR: It's okay.

GN: So, they tried very hard until they get a girl, [laughter] and then had no more children. They called me in a Yiddish word, "a mizinik" that means little finger or pinky. As a girl that they really wanted for a long time, I was quite spoiled. Everybody loved me. We had a very good family and beautiful relationship. My brothers tried to take care of me and protected me in any way that they could. I think I grew up in a very loving environment. My father was a carpenter, and my parents came from Ukraine, from the



shtetl called Kodima actually near Odessa. They settled in Moscow and my father built the house himself. We lived in our own house. That was very unusual for Russia, because usually people share apartments, and we had our own house. I had my own bedroom, which also was unusual. Later after I came here I realized I grew up almost as if I had been born in the United States. My mother worked from home because there were a lot of children, and she was taking care of the house and kids and my father who was constantly working. My mother would not even let me go to kindergarten. I stayed home and was envious looking out the window. Through the window, I could see the kindergarten and children playing together, and I was really jealous that I was not in this group. But much later I realized that my mom was right not to send me to this kindergarten if they had the chance to keep me home and raise a healthy and happy child. In Russia, it was a different culture, and it was very unusual that my father not only had a house, but we had a garden around the house and the fence that surrounded the garden. In this garden, we had everything. We had all the vegetables that he grew. We had all kind of berries and apple, pear, and cherry trees. [laughter] We were doing a lot of jams from it that we would be able to use in the winter.

JR: Sounds great.

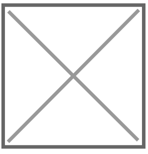
GN: Yes. Also, we even had some chickens and fresh eggs. [laughter]

JR: Wow.

GN: It’s not typical at all. Very unusual situation. But what we did not have was indoor plumbing. On the street near us was the well that we could pump the water into buckets and bring them back to the house.

JR: That makes it hard.

GN: When we could not go to the outhouse, we used a bucket indoors and later emptied it. A few years later, we did get indoor plumbing. This was in the center of Moscow



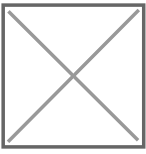
actually, very almost center, and of course, Moscow was growing, and they were building big buildings, not separate houses.

JR: How was your father able to build his own house? How did you get the land to do that?

GN: This I don't know. [laughter] Maybe it was permitted at that time, and they moved to Moscow because it was all legal, of course. I have no idea. Probably, he somehow got permission to do it. So, our house was under the construction, and the city wanted to build something big at this place, so they instead, of this house that we had – I can't tell you how square meters it was. I only know that it was a really comfortable place to stay. My oldest brother, when he got married and they had first daughter, we all lived together, and they lived in one room. My other brother got married and he moved [with] his wife [to] a new place that she lived. My youngest brother stayed with us also. He had his room, and I had my room, and my parents. My brother who got married and who has a daughter received just one room. Oh, I think he has a son also at that time. Just five meters [per] person.

JR: Wow.

GN: Twenty square meters for four of them. Somebody else lived in the same apartment, like two-room apartment and one room is the neighbor sharing the same kitchen and the bathroom. Also, my parents received two-bedroom apartment including me and my younger brother. Then I got married, and we lived in an eleven square meter room with our first son when he was born. My brother would stay overnight in this apartment until he got married, and then we decided to move. It was practiced in Russia to exchange apartments. If we had two-bedroom apartment, we could exchange a one-bedroom apartment in two different areas and give those people two-bedroom apartment. This is what we did and finally, my family moved out. We got one bedroom with the separate kitchen where we were living together with our son, and we had one room, and



it was a screen.

JR: Like a dividing thing?

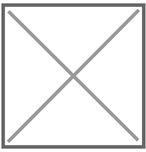
GN: Divider. It’s a divider that was used when we had company in the same room. We would make noise like music and talking when he was sleeping, and he got used to it.

JR: Can I ask you a few questions just to step back? Did you have other family that lived in Moscow that was around when you were growing up, like grandparents or aunts or uncles?

GN: Yes. My father’s parents were alive at that time, and they lived in suburb, but not too far from Moscow; you can take a train. It’s not the subway but train, like T you have here, and visit them. A lot of time I stayed with them because in Russia people tried to get away from the city in the summer and go somewhere to the ocean for vacation or just take their children someplace that’s a better environment, like in [the] forest, some areas where there are lakes. So, I visited and stayed with them a lot. My father had a very big family – six sisters and brothers with their families and my cousins, just huge. My mother had only one brother, and they were very close because they lost their parents when they were really young. I was very close to my mother's brother’s two daughters, one of them especially.   I spent a lot of time with them also. My family was so united with everyone; relatively, we were very close. So, finally when I emigrated, I brought everybody here, so a lot of family are now here.

JR: That’s great.

GN: My mother had her mother – I didn’t know my grandfather from my mother’s side because he had been killed by antisemites, but my grandmother lived with us until I was six years old, and she spoke only Yiddish. So, this is how I learned all my Yiddish. It was from my mom’s mother.



JR: What was your family like in terms of Jewish identity? Was that something that you talked about as a family? Was it something that was part of how you saw yourselves?

GN: Yes. I saw myself very Jewish. But in Russia, Jewish it is not just ethnicity, it's like nationality. There is a stamp on your passport and is part of religion – really wasn't able to learn too much. I only know that my father was able to write and read in Yiddish, and my parents would talk in Yiddish sometimes when they did not want us to understand, but of course, I learned a lot. I still love the sound of Jewish music, and some people would call me Zionist. Because of antisemitism in Russia a lot of Jewish people tried to hide from their children their identity, which was not the case in our family. My parents, especially my father, always taught me to be proud to be Jewish and stand up for it. In Russia, people would not be aware of my ethnicity because I did not look Jewish, and sometimes, when people who did not know that I am Jewish would start saying something negative or jokes about Jews, I always would get up, and I would say that I am Jewish, and I don't want them to talk like this, I would be trying to protect the pride of being a Jew. The only thing that we knew about Judaism really was Passover. My father would go to the synagogue it was the only synagogue in Moscow that was open, and he would be able to bring some matzoh. ¬ ¬We also did not know the story.

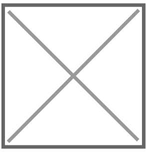
JR: It's okay.

GN: You wouldn't think that I would be so brave. [laughter]

JR: It can be very painful to remember things from a long time ago.

GN: This was how we knew about this only holiday that was Jewish, not too much of the history.

JR: Had your parents been raised practicing any Jewish religious practices?



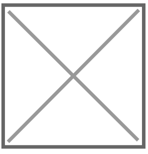
GN: I only know – no Shabbat. They didn't know other than Yiddish. I suppose – in that situation that they grow up, it was a lot of Jews and the environment that they grew up was probably –I don't know – in situation of pogroms and everything. I didn't really hear from my parents too much about them practicing Judaism. The only thing that I said I knew [was] that my father still would go every year to the synagogue to bring home matzah – it just was it. Talking about just to be a Jew. I always felt that they were very proud being Jew and raised me this way to keep my head high, and I think that this was a beautiful gift.

JR: Did your brothers feel the same way? Was it something that had an impact on them in that way also do you think?

GN: I think so. The oldest brother was called Vigdor, which is Jewish name, but he would sign like Victor in Russian. My middle brother was called Piny, but he changed his name when he got married. He put his name as Peter. And my third brother was called Izrael, and he kept his name. [laughter] I actually was named after my [great]-grandmother that I never knew, and her name was Golda. When I was born, they didn't want to give me this name, and they only kept the first letter, and they called me Galina, which was very popular name in that time. Also, my father – his name was (Grsh?). When you got to ZAGS – it's an organization where you register the child, when the child was born. Some of my relatives just because my parents couldn't go, went to register my birth, and he decided that Galina Girshirna wouldn't sound good and he registered me as Galina (Gzigozeuna?), which sounds more Russian. [laughter]

JR: Were your parents upset?

GN: I don't know about that because it just was a fact that they didn't try to change. When I got older and understood why he did it, I was happy. He did it because it was kind of protection of me that people would recognize the Jew for the first or middle name. I think this is why he did it also because of the time. I mean all those Jewish people tried



to survive in different ways, and this was one of the ways that my relatives thought about me.

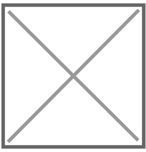
JR: Did you experience antisemitism? You mentioned that sometimes people would say comments about Jews, and you would identify yourself. Did you experience other kinds of antisemitism in school or anything like that?

GN: You see, I didn't look Jewish, and I can say that personally I didn't experience it, but we had some girls at school who were very Jewish-looking and who were really harassed especially at a period of time in 1953 when there was a campaign against Jews by Stalin, and it was about doctors – all Jewish names – that they tried to kill him or poison him. It was very difficult to go to school because it was on the front page in every paper. It was giving people the green light to do anything that they want against Jews, like preparing for pogroms or other harm. This is how people felt. My parents never talked about it at home, but being at school, I just saw that some Jewish girls couldn't even look into other people's eyes, and children would talk loudly about Jews just being part of this campaign against the state. I was not one of these girls. I still was going with my head held high. Somehow, in my family, we didn't talk too much about it. Maybe they were still protecting us an afraid to talk about it. I remember asking a few questions and getting an answer that is just the propaganda, and they don't believe that is the true story; it would be the end of the conversation. They would not talk about politics, and at the same time, it was the atmosphere of pride.

JR: Did your family talk about Israel much? Was that a topic?

GN: It was a good question. You know that very interesting thing happened when Golda Meir one time came to Russia. She is actually a very distant relative of my mother's side of the family.

JR: Wow.



GN: I knew that my parents were receiving letters from Israel. Also, my grandfather's brother emigrated to England before the revolution, and they were receiving letters from England, too. They were hiding those letters at home, and when the time came of unpleasant situation for Jews, I think they just destroyed all the letters. The same time when Golda Meir was in Moscow, the woman from her cabinet met with my mother. I don't know how they communicated or met and recognized each other, but this women came just close to my mother, gave her a bag with clothes that nobody could see and just squeezed her hand. My brother told me that his women was also involved in saving my family's house.

JR: Wow.

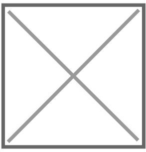
GN: This is only what I remember, talking about just connection with Israel – getting some clothes or something from them. It was once. At the time, of course, it was very exciting, and they were talking about it, but it was not too much to talk about. [laughter]

JR: Right. It was a very brief meeting.

GN: Yes.

JR: At what point did you start to talk about emigrating?

GN: I have two sons, but the older one was in tenth grade. In Russia, we had only a ten grade high school system. We wanted to apply for he finished the school, because when he would turn eighteen, he would be drafted. For Jewish boys, it was almost a death sentence. We got lucky with help from the office of Senator Edward Kennedy to receive permission to emigrate before he finished his last year at school. We knew there was a tragic situation about a group of people who wanted to hijack the plane from Saint Petersburg or Leningrad at that time, and they were caught. I think they really opened the door for emigration. They were the first pioneers who stood up. They knew that probably they would be caught. It didn't really too much matter to them because they



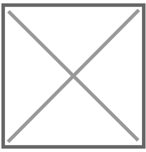
wanted to make a statement and just open the door for everyone, like Russia could become a democratic country in the way that they would allow people to live where they want and be able to emigrate if they want to. But the initiator in our family was my ex-husband's father. He really was a very strong and brave man. He went through World War II as a lieutenant. He commanded a platoon of soldiers for communication lines. The job was to string wires between different Army positions and most often it was under direct enemy fire. He was twice almost shot by the Germans. He was in the occupied territory, and was able to escape. He even inscribed his name on the Reichstag, the building where Hitler was hiding in Berlin. He was a very loyal Soviet citizen who was fighting courageously for his country to have a better life. Then when he came back, and my son remembers how he was talking to him and saying to him, "When I was fighting for the country, I didn't have anything, just bread and water, and I was happy. But now I have everything. I have bread, water, and apartment, and I'm very unhappy." He said, "Because it is not what I thought I was fighting for." People were really idealistic, and I would say that who made a revolution in Russia, it was a lot of Jews. [laughter]

JR: Right.

GN: Jews, they're kind of a liberal, and they wanted peace. They always campaigned for it. My father-in-law understood it so clearly at the time, that he actually asked his son, my ex-husband if he think that we should apply to leave the country, especially [since] we believed – and my ex-husband didn't want to give all his knowledge to the country that he thought makes a lot of crime. I don't know if you ever heard about the war crimes tribunal.

JR: No.

GN: It was just a crime tribunal about the Germans, and it was a statement that in this country which committed crimes at that time, that every person who lives in the country is responsible for the crime committed in this country and that point was a really political



move, that my husband didn't want to be part of the crime that he thought the government really committed in Russia, in Moscow. It was a kind of scary decision more than just a decision – of course I was young, and I would follow my family, even after we got refusal and after we would go into the administrative officials and even at my work.

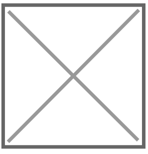
JR: What work were you doing?

GN: Actually, my education – is a mechanical engineer. In Russia, it was not unusual for women to have this education. Then I worked in an organization that's called NIAT [National Institute of Aviation Technologies]; it's something to do with air – not aerospace, but planes and would consider maybe for Russians that it's secret, but I left this place, and I went to work in a different company. Then went to the government organization that was distributing funds all over the country in this technical field that I knew. So, I switched actually my profession – not because I wanted to emigrate and get rid of clearance, most because I probably felt more fit into this kind of work as I loved math and I'm very good with figures and calculations. I really enjoyed doing this kind of work more than [being] a mechanical engineer. So, when I came to this country, I didn't pursue my engineering career, and I start the program – English as a second language – to learn English because I didn't know any English when I came here. Then I pursued accounting and became a bookkeeper and worked in a business office with payroll, accounts payable. I still prefer this kind of accounting job, being full-charge bookkeeper, responsible for everything in accounting. But this is what I really like to do still.

JR: Sorry. I interrupted you to talk about what you were doing. So, you were talking about when you applied to emigrate.

GN: Yes.

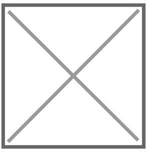
JR: When did you apply?



GN: It was in ’75, and at that time, we knew that we really wanted to leave country, but also we knew that it would be very difficult. We also knew that a lot of people were receiving refusal.

JR: What were conditions like for you than that – what was it like there that was difficult at that time, that was prompting people to begin to want to leave?

GN: My husband left his job. He was chief of the laboratory. He was in computer science and in a meteorological center. He had a lot of Jewish people there that he’s saying that they asked him to leave because if he wanted to leave, it would affect them and their work and everything. Everybody was scared. I don’t know why he left. I know one rabbi here that I was introduced to through the Action For [Soviet] Jewry, and then we became real close friends, who said, “I don’t know how I would behave in an extreme situation.” Of course, I didn’t know. It is an extreme situation. Maybe this [is] where my strength was, that I didn’t leave my job. I continued to work. I actually was the only person who supported the family at that time. We had already two sons at that time. Some coworkers were writing letters to high officials. It’s “GOSSNAB.” Such organization does not exist now. But it was a very huge organization for dispersing of funds. They would write letters that they can not breathe the same air as I [laughter]. I have to leave. They have to fire me. It is funny; there is a whole thing that people would be fired, but according to their rules, they had no grounds to fire me. I didn’t dare come to work one minute late or make any mistakes at my job. Our family applied to emigrate in 1975, but emigration started several years before that. You would hear about somebody leaving and people were whispering and would not talk loud about it. I told you that my mother had an only brother, and I was very close to his daughter. They applied to emigrate. So, there were people that we knew who were very close relatives. Her husband was one of the most important economists in the country. Everybody thought that they would receive a refusal, bu they let them go. It was because the war started in Israel at that time. I don’t know their chess play, why the government played



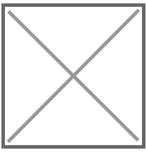
this card, but they just let a stream of immigrants leave the country at that time.

JR: Interesting.

GN: Officially, we could only go to Israel because we were receiving invitations from Israel. This was [a] game that government played. They emigrated, and they came to the United States. He was very well known here, and he got a job right away in a university. Now, he's still teaching and working at school at Pennsylvania University. He has tenure there. So, for many years – but first, they came to California, and of course, we were in touch. I wasn't afraid to get letters from them. But even before we applied – when we applied – when they left, of course, it was so new for everyone and still painful – because you thought that you would never see these people again. I was the one they gave me the key to their apartment and asked me to give some different little presents, things just to their friends, relatives, because some people were very afraid to come to say goodbye. Then, finally, when we decided to apply and we received refusal for years. So, they were the ones who were really very supportive, not only emotionally – sending letters – but financially – sending parcels, some clothes, and everything. In Russia, if you sell it, you can live for half a year, maybe. Because I was only [inaudible] children, it was difficult to support the family. We were introduced to Ida Nudel because my in-laws were living in a condominium, the area where she was living. You heard this name?

JR: Yes.

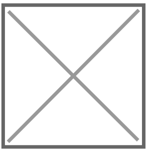
GN: She was refusenik at that time for a long time. My father-in-law, as I told you, made the decision first. He was very active, wasn't scared to be in touch with her, to talk to her, to support her. This [is] how we got introduced to this group of people who applied to emigrate because even we decided to apply to emigrate, a lot of people were hiding this information from anyone, les anyone should know. They were afraid even to go to the synagogue, the only synagogue that we had. This is how we were introduced to the group, through Ida Nudel and through, actually, my father-in-law. It is a matter of trust



because a lot of people who were refuseniks falsely were GB agents who participated also in this group. Of course, people were scared to talk openly about certain things and be open in their actions. I was open at work. Of course, where I worked, it was a cafeteria, where you go down to the first floor, and they'll have a meal there. People were afraid to sit with me at the same table to show their loyalty. So, I would go down, and I would get the food, and I would sit at the table alone. This was more than three years. It wasn't a day or two. I went to the boss, and I told him that I understand the situation, that he's probably not happy that I continue to work here, but that I'm the only one who supports the family, and I can't lose a job. I said that I'll try to look for another job, and if I find one, I will leave. But other than that, I wouldn't leave. Maybe because he was sympathetic to my story. Nobody touched me and I continued to work. People got used to seeing me with my head high, walking in the halls. Some people were very interested in my case. They would stop me in the hall and say, "So, What's going on?" The man who was in the personnel department was an office before – I would say – in the Army, so he would be very trusted by the government. Once, I went to his office, and in front of me, he called OVIR, this organization which issued the visas, asking them about the situation of our family. He was saying, "I don't know what to do with her. She's a very good worker. Do I give her a raise, when she's leaving?" [laughter] Of course, he didn't get any answers. We started to get very much involved in the activities that – this group called itself "Aliyah" because they actually – a lot of them planning really to go to Israel. Even they knew that we were open about it, that we're planning to go to [the] United States – first of all, we already had a cousin there – somehow, we were still accepted in the group. We became very active.

JR: You and your husband both?

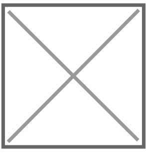
GN: Yes. Our son, looking at me and not completely understanding the danger of this game, was just unbelievably brave, and I was scared because he started to study Hebrew underground. He became a religious person. In Russia, we didn't know the



difference between Orthodox, Reform, or Conservative. Everything was Orthodox. When we came to this country, he continued to be this way. He wouldn't even touch a glass of water – it was extreme – in someone else's house. [laughter] There's a funny story about him. We ended up coming to Lynn, and the rabbi from an Orthodox synagogue invited him to his house. Rabbi opened the refrigerator, and he saw the sausages in there and asked him if it's kosher. [laughter] I started to keep Kosher in Russia.

JR: It must have been hard.

GN: It was not too hard because actually we couldn't eat meat anyway, and the only chicken that we would receive was at Passover at the synagogue, and it was Kosher chicken. We knew that time. But I continued to work, and it was difficult. I had very strong support from two of my friends. They received all the anger, not I. People wouldn't come to me to tell me, but they would come to them. They were Russians, not Jewish, and [say], "It's too bad that Hitler didn't kill them all. It's too bad that he didn't hang them by the feet." She would tell me all of this, and she would still go after work with me, walking on the street and telling me everything. I think she was a hero at that time. [laughter] Not us. Because you can expect anything. We became so active that it was the first Jewish song festival that this group organized. My son would carry the big suitcase with batteries, which was very heavy, to play the music. He was wearing the kippah. He wouldn't go Saturday at school. We had school Saturday. He didn't become a Komsomol member. You know the next step is to be a party member. So, he refused to enroll in this youth group. But because he was an A student, and he was very smart – I mean, he proved it by going to MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. [laughter] So they still allowed him to remain in school, because school wanted to look good academically. The school did not know that we had applied to emigrate, and I was called to the principal to put the pressure on him, and my answer was that Sasha doesn't feel that he is good enough to join.

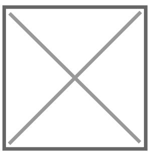


JR: Wow.

GN: In Russia, he never would be accepted to MFTE [Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology] the same level as MIT because he was Jewish. His teacher, who was maybe naïve telling him that he could apply to this school and be accepted. Sasha would say, "Are you kidding me?" and she would say, "No, no, they would." But it didn't happen because we emigrated before he finished high school. My youngest son at that time was going to kindergarten. I have to tell you why I realized later and really appreciate when my mother didn't send me to kindergarten. [laughter] Because it was a very good kindergarten. We were living in an apartment, and the kindergarten was just around the building, and he could walk there. There were a lot of children and only two women. I don't know how you call them – who were taking care of them. They would open the windows and the door to make a – how you call it? – the wind.

JR: A cross-current?

GN: Yes. The children would get sick because they really couldn't handle so many children. My youngest son was very hyper, and he couldn't sleep during the day. Everybody's supposed to sleep. They would put them for a nap, and because he wouldn't sleep, this woman would put the towel-whatever around his eyes and his nose, so he could hardly breathe, and make him lie down like this for an hour and a half. I did not know anything about it. I only noticed that he developed a tic. Do you know what tic means? He just starts blinking his eyes, and then it moved to the muscles group of his body. It was hard to watch him play outside. I would rush from work to pick him up, and he would be crying, but he never told me anything about it until I took a couple of weeks in the winter to go skiing with him. Then, he opened up, talked, and told me this story. At that time, we were already in refusal. I was furious. When we came back, I went to the principal of this kindergarten and told her that I would sue their company. You have to understand, in my situation somebody else would be quiet and really would be afraid to



do anything like this. I was very aggressive and the principal did not know that we applied to emigrate – nobody knew there, only at my work – and she begged me not to do anything. She said that she will fire this woman, and she did. I Felt this is just – in my situation, it's a point for me against the government. I tried to get extra points that I could to claim against the government. My older son had some problem with his spine. His spine could not adjust to his growth, and he was put in the hospital. Children were there in the big size classroom at the same time they were lying in bed and studying. I still was working, supporting my family, and I decided to ask my trade union for financial support. You know in Russia, at work, everybody must be a member paying dues. I could not believe the anger that I received from them that how dare I ask for help from the country that I betray? Because I was paying monthly dues for years, they couldn't ignore my application. Do you think they gave me any significant money? [laughter] But was another point for me against the government.

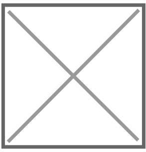
JR: Interesting.

GN: Because I was following the law. You see? I didn't break any rules. I was playing their games, that they couldn't – this is what is so interesting. At the same time, they want that to show the good face with the bad manners.

JR: Right. Interesting.

GN: My son, when he was in this hospital he had a paddle for playing ping-pong. I raised my sons as I was raised, to be really proud to be Jewish. At that time, we had more information available, some literature that we got through this group from the West. The new world opened to us that we never knew before. Some children in this hospital, of course, were antisemitic, and one boy scratched on my son's paddle the world "Zhyd. Do you know what it means? Jew. My son got this paddle and broke it on his head.

JR: Wow.



GN: [laughter] It happened that I came to visit my son the say when this accident happened. It was his birthday, and I brought a very delicious cake – “the bird milk” was the name of the cake, and it was hard to find. It was March, a beautiful day, and I was proud to get it and bring it to the school. The teacher came out and said, “He is punished. He is not getting any birthday cake, nothing,” because he did that. I said, “Can I talk to him?” She said, “Definitely,” thinking that I would lecture him. We walked out together, and I told him, “Sasha, I am very proud of you.” This guy – he had a problem with his spine, but to me, my son was a hero there, really taking care of all the people who were Jewish and who were abused.

JR: That’s funny.

GN: I was really proud that I raised my children to be this way. Not to be afraid and not to put their head in the sand, but stand up for their rights and for their nation.

JR: I want to start hearing about your involvement in the Jewish Women’s Movement, but I just want to –

[END OF INTERVIEW]