

The kindest cut

Four Russian boys make 'a deal with God' as they take part in a belated brit milah

By Ellen Bernstein
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Pavel Gorbatty, a thin, slightly stooped 12-year-old, placed his hands on his narrow hips and contemplated his zipper. "I feel like I make a deal with God," he said, minutes after his circumcision.

Last Friday, Gorbatty and three other Russian school-age boys chose to enter into an ancient covenant between God and the Jewish people. *Brit milah*, the ritual circumcision required of all eight-day-old Jewish boys, was outlawed until recently by the government of the former Soviet Union.

Now 10,000 miles away, where they are free to practice Judaism, dozens of Washington emigres are signing up for the surgery, which can be physically painful late in life.

Waiting for his operation at Washington Adventist Hospital, Ilya Zusin, age 10, tried to assuage his mother's fears. "It's his first surgery. It's very hard," said Nelly Zusin, recalling how Ilya used to cower at the sight of needles or blood.

"Mom, the only one that's scared is you," said the boy. Somewhat embarrassed, he sunk into an oversized examining chair and puffed his surgical cap into a mushroom. Boris Zusin laughed at his freckle-faced son, but found nothing humorous about the prospect of a knife coming anywhere near his own genitalia. He passed on the free operation, which was arranged by the United Jewish Appeal Federation of Greater Washington (UJAF) and the hospital in Takoma Park.

"My wife likes me the way I am," he half-joked. Zusin is typical of an older generation of secular Soviet Jews, who believe it is too late for them to find meaning in such rituals.

"It's too late to become a sincere Jew," said Eugeny Zagoskin, whose son Pavel attends the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School on a scholarship offered to Russian youngsters. "It's not possible to absorb everything at our age. [But] I want my son to feel like a Jew."

What eight-year-old Pavel Zagoskin was feeling, however, was restless and bored. "This is the worst day of my life," he groaned. He drummed his fingernails on the arm of his leather chair and insisted his parents forced him to go under the knife.

His mother, Olga Perelmutter, protested. "We don't want him to be different. He agreed it is better to be the same as the other children in his school."

Fearful memories

To encourage his son,



Rabbi Raphael Malka wheels in Vladimir Gorbatty, 6, one of four Russian boys who were circumcised at Washington Adventist Hospital in Takoma Park last Friday.

Photo by Ellen Bernstein

Eugeny Zagoskin said he will be circumcised this summer. His own father had a bris as a baby in St. Petersburg, a ritual that endangered the lives of many Jews during World War II. German soldiers were known to round up prisoners and order them to drop their pants, Zagoskin said. Men missing their foreskin were carried off and executed. The terror of exposing his child to such persecution made Zagoskin hesitate at first when his son inquired about getting a bris.

It is becoming common for emigre children who attend Jewish day schools to inquire about a bris, said Judy Klein, resettlement director at UJAF. She initiated the circumcision program one year ago in the wake of the resettlement of 1,500 Soviet emigres in the Washington area. Soviets contact her and she schedules the surgeries with the hospital staff.

The biblical story of the Jewish patriarch Abraham — not to mention a little peer pressure — is encouraging more and more children to undergo circumcision. Ilya Zusin said his friends egged him on the day before with a chorus of "mazel tovs." His girlfriend, (just a friend, he insists) told him to "have a nice time."

Urologist Henry Weiss assured the Zusins that under general anesthesia, Ilya would feel nothing during the operation, and experience a slight burning a few days afterward. "Nothing a little chicken soup wouldn't cure," the genial Dr. Wise told Nelly Zusin. "How about pizza?" she asked.

Wise, together with Rabbi Raphael Malka, a *mohel* or ritual circumciser, have performed 56 circumcisions for

Soviet newcomers, most ages four to 14. Among them are a few adults. All services are provided free, courtesy of the doctor, the *mohel* and the hospital. Other doctors and rabbis, including Rabbi Joseph Scheller and Cantor Moishe Meirovich, have offered their services.

Most of the children looked to Abraham as their role model. The biblical patriarch was 99 when he was circumcised. "It was a promise to God," said Pavel Gorbatty.

Joyful after her son's bris, Liliya Gorbatty nevertheless felt the actual operation was insignificant. "It's most important to circumcise the heart, not the body," said Liliya, whose other son Vladimir, age six, was recovering in another room. "But I believe this is the first step on the way they will follow all their life."

Rabbi Malka, all smiles behind his surgeon's mask, walked into the post-op room, where young Vladimir Gorbatty lay curled up in a cotton blanket, sucking lemonade through a straw.

"Now he is looking at himself in a different way," Malka chuckled, taking the boy into his arms.

Vladimir's mother clasped her hands and bragged how her little boy, who attends Jewish day school in Richmond, Va., loves to listen to Bible stories. He knows the whole story of Abraham and Isaac, said Janet Phillips, a friend who drove them to the hospital from Richmond. Phillips coaxed Vladimir to tell what happened when Abraham took Isaac up the mountain.

Sleepy-eyed, Vladimir just turned his head, sipped his lemonade and mumbled something about a rabbit. ■