



Who Is My Family?

Are we Jewish or Lithuanian or Portuguese or British? Or all of the above? With some exploration and an introduction to PJ Library, my family and I discovered an answer.

BY GINTARE RODRIGUES SILVESTRE AS TOLD TO LISA TRANK

Gintare Rodrigues Silvestre was born and raised in Lithuania, where she lived until she was 21 years old. This is the story of her journey to embrace her Jewish identity and how PJ Library fostered a deeper Jewish connection and sense of community for her and her children. She and her family have lived outside of Belfast, Northern Ireland, since 2012. The 33-year-old is the mother of three children: Oscar (14), Eliza (8), and Raphael (6).

Not too long ago, my family had an identity crisis. At least that's what it felt like to me. I'd always questioned my Jewish identity; after all, in my home country of Lithuania, which was once run by the Soviet Union, religion of any kind was not valued — and certainly not Judaism.

I knew I was Jewish on my mother's side and that my great-grandmother had died in the Holocaust. But for the most part, our Jewish heritage was lost. While my mother and granny

The Rodrigues Silvestre family (left to right): Gintare, Oscar, Eliza, Raphael, and João.

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used to light the Shabbat candles, I had no Jewish education growing up. Truthfully, I never bothered to learn much about it.

But everything changed when I became pregnant with my third child, Raphael. I wanted to give him a name that had a connection to Judaism. This moment literally brought my Jewish heritage to life. It also made me realize that I was ready to dig deeper into my family's history. My husband, João, who was raised Catholic in Portugal and is now an atheist, has fully supported this journey.

This yearning led me to Poland in 2019 to participate in the March of the Living, a program that teaches people about the tragedy of the Holocaust and the once-flourishing Jewish communities in Europe. During that trip, a rabbi asked me about my Jewish heritage. I downplayed my personal connection but mentioned that my mother was Jewish. He quickly exclaimed, "Then you're Jewish!"

Up until that point, my family's history was more of a history on paper. Going to Poland



brought me eye to eye with the realities; I was able to connect with the stories, the pictures, and the people. Now my great-grandmother was a real person with a real story.

While the time in Poland was difficult, it was also comforting to not feel so isolated in my own experience of being Jewish. After that trip, I fully understood how important it was that my children knew who they were.

When our family moved to Northern Ireland from Italy in 2012, I truly believed we were the only Jewish family in Belfast. When I returned from the March of Living trip, I contacted the Belfast Jewish Community, an Orthodox synagogue, and was told that the Jewish community in Belfast was tiny. Apparently, the youngest member of the synagogue was in their 20s.

But hope was sparked when a chairman from the synagogue said there was an Israeli family with four kids in our neighborhood. I instantly reached out, and our families clicked. We only wished that our children weren't the only Jewish children in the area. We began to think, "Could there be more?" I was about to find out.

Earlier this year, I met a woman on a Birthright Israel trip, and she told me all about PJ Library and the potential of meeting other families through the program. I was encouraged but skeptical.

Soon after I returned, the woman contacted me and said, "You're not going to believe this. There are many more families in Northern Ireland. Fourteen or 15!" I was really surprised

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and immediately wanted to meet them.

Together with PJ Library's help, we all met this past Shavuot. We had cheesecakes, storytelling, and a book for each child. It was amazing to meet all these families. There were Israeli families and other Jewish families who were part of a small group in Northern Ireland called the Progressive Jewish Link, a liberal/reform, progressive Jewish community.

After the Shavuot gathering, we communicated all the time about finding more opportunities to celebrate our Jewish connection and get together, including an end-of-summer picnic hosted by the Israeli

families. And what's truly exciting is that in September, PJ Library hosted a Rosh Hashanah event at the Belfast Jewish Community for the first time in decades. It was incredible to connect to this newfound Jewish community.

The PJ Library books have also been amazing for my children. When I started introducing Jewish traditions into our family, it was just me telling them about Judaism or cooking a traditional dish. But when my children got the books for the first time, Judaism became real. They saw themselves in the pictures, the words, and in the stories. Not just mama, right?

With so few Jewish people around, my children feel like they are part of a special club. They know all about Israel and hope to visit one day. They cannot believe that there is a country where most people are Jewish.

Throughout this incredible journey, I realized I could not live with myself if I were part of the generation where our Jewish heritage stopped. People like my great-grandmother suffered and died because of who they were — because of them, we can be who we are. We have no right to close that door.

With the help of PJ Library and our growing Jewish community, our family has turned questioning our identity into embracing our identity. Yes, I'm Lithuanian; my husband is Portuguese. We live in Northern Ireland, and our children have British passports. But what we share is our rich, beautiful, and diverse Jewish heritage, one that I'm proud to say we're helping to keep alive. ■