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Klinghoffer daughters recall the horror that put a face on terrorism

Three decades ago their wheelchair-bound father was thrown off the deck of the cruise ship Achille Lauro.

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen | Oct. 9, 2015 | 10:48 PM | 6

NEW YORK – Before the day 30 years ago when their wheelchair-bound father was shot and dumped over the side of a cruise ship, “we were just a regular family,” says Lisa Klinghoffer, one of her father Leon’s two daughters.

Since then, Lisa and her sister Ilsa have been the face of how close to home terrorism can hit. Their parents were on the cruise ship Achille Lauro with longtime friends celebrating the Klinghoffers’ 36th wedding anniversary. Lisa and Ilsa were young adults then, one married and the other engaged.

Leon had suffered two strokes and was confined to a wheelchair. His wife Marilyn was battling aggressive colon cancer. But “she was a socialite who gave parties all over the place,” says Lisa. “She had this mantra that you should celebrate the happy times in life, because there are so many unhappy times.”

When four Palestinian terrorists burst into the ship’s dining room on October 8, 1985, shooting wildly and taking everyone hostage, it marked the end of the Klinghoffers’ happy times as a family.

The gunmen forced everyone out of the dining room, separating Jews from non-Jews. “My mother was gripping my father’s chair, pushing him,” recalled Lisa at the Center for Jewish History in Manhattan on Thursday. She was speaking at an event to mark the hijacking’s 30th anniversary and the daughters’ donation to the American Jewish Historical Society of family correspondence and artifacts related to the murder.

Once the terrorists moved the passengers outside, they ordered everyone up the ship’s stairs to a deck above. Marilyn couldn’t carry Leon up. At gunpoint, she was forced to let go of his wheelchair and head upstairs as one of the terrorists said he would “take care” of Leon, their daughters recalled at the event.

That day three decades ago, Ilsa stopped to pick up dinner at a Korean deli on her way home from work as a health care administrator.

“On the radio a bulletin came on saying a cruise shipped had been hijacked in the Mediterranean,” she told Haaretz. “I dropped everything, ran the two blocks to my apartment and pulled out the itinerary. It was a match. I couldn’t believe it. I immediately called my sister.”

Lisa had been painting in her art studio all day. When she got home “there were 100 messages waiting for me. I knew it would be bad news but thought one of our parents took ill. On the messages Ilsa kept saying ‘the ship, the ship.’ I didn’t know what she meant.”

They quickly met at their parents’ apartment; they had to pass through a media scrum to get in. Friends began filtering in, joining Lisa and her husband, and Ilsa and her fiancé. Government officials told the daughters that if they spoke out publicly, the hijackers might show some compassion to their parents. So for the first time, the sisters made the rounds of television news programs.

“That was followed by two excruciating days,” Ilsa said at the event Thursday night. “Then the State Department called and said no one was injured” and that the hijacking had ended. “We poured champagne” as everyone in the apartment celebrated.

Undeclared war

But before long, the sisters noticed people leaving without saying goodbye. Then someone turned off the television to which they had been glued. Lisa’s husband took her into one room, Ilsa’s fiancé took her into another. They broke the news to the sisters that actually one American hostage had been killed — their father.

He had been shot in the head and the chest. Then, still belted into his wheelchair, he was thrown overboard.

“Call us naïve, but it was mind-boggling that a person could do this to a defenseless man like my father in a wheelchair. It was inconceivable. We never thought it would end the way it did,” Lisa told Haaretz.

A few days later their mother returned to New York, frail but resolute. “She was hell on wheels, determined to educate people and make sure everyone responsible was held accountable,” Lisa said at the Center for Jewish History.

On October 30, 1985, though debilitated by her spreading cancer, Marilyn traveled with her daughters to Washington to testify before Congress. There she said that “terrorism is an undeclared war in which we are all combatants,” her grandson Max recalled at the CJH event.

Max is Ilsa’s son. He and Lisa’s son Michael are “like brothers,” their mothers told Haaretz. The cousins, who never got to meet their grandparents, grew up just a block apart in Greenwich Village, where the sisters still live with their husbands. Max works as a communications director for a New York City agency and Michael as a counterterrorism analyst for the FBI.

At a family dinner, Marilyn told her daughters she intended to sue the PLO. “We were petrified,” Lisa said at the CJH. “She said ‘this is something I must do for your father,’” recalled Ilsa.

Just four months after the hijacking, Marilyn Klinghoffer died. Six weeks later, Ilsa was married in a ceremony far more somber than if her fun-loving parents were still alive.

A dozen years later, in 1997, Marilyn’s lawsuit ended in a settlement with the PLO. “Her lawsuit set the precedent for being able to sue a terrorist organization or foreign government, any activity involving American citizens,” Ilsa told Haaretz.

Lisa declined to specify the amount of the court-sealed settlement but said the sisters used it to establish the Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer Memorial Foundation at the Anti-Defamation League — “that’s exactly what our mother wanted us to do.”

The Klinghoffer foundation runs advanced training courses for dozens of law enforcement officials each year, Lisa says; it brings in experts from Israel. At the end of the workshop, the sisters speak to participants who include FBI field officers and counterterrorism special-ops commanders in city, state and federal agencies. More than 1,000 have taken part since the program began in 2003.

“It makes us feel that we’ve made a difference in a lot of people’s lives. And that’s a good feeling,” Lisa says.

Controversial theater play

In recent years the sisters have generally avoided speaking to the press, though they occasionally put out statements when something like the

controversial opera "The Death of Klinghoffer" is performed, as in September 2014, when it premiered at the Metropolitan Opera. Hundreds of protesters gathered across the street from the Met, booing loudly.

The opera was supposed to be simultaneously broadcast to hundreds of movie theaters around the world. After negotiations with the ADL, the Met canceled those broadcasts but went ahead with the performance, including a statement from the Klinghoffer sisters in the program.

The opera has been a source of pain to them since they first saw its world premier at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 1991. "We don't believe in censorship but we do believe in sensitivity," Lisa says.

When they first heard an opera was being composed, "we were overjoyed, just thrilled there would be an opera about our father," she says. "That was our initial feeling."

After not hearing from anyone working on it, Lisa looked up the phone number of the theater director who had conceived the idea, Peter Sellars, and left him a message.

He called back a few days later, "sounding a little confused about why I'd called," Lisa says. "I said 'I thought you'd like to know a little bit about our parents.' There was a long pause and he said 'I don't think so. I don't need a consultant.'"

Lisa says she "couldn't believe the conversation. He said 'look Lisa, I've heard you're an artist so you'll understand what I mean when you see it.' That should have been a tip-off that this would be questionable. I said 'you can call me any time.' I didn't hear from them once."

The sisters bought their own tickets to see the U.S. premiere; they brought along several of their parents' friends. "The opening scene was so offensive, so beyond the pale I couldn't believe it. It was an out-of-body experience seeing it with my parents' friends," Lisa says.

The first scene at the time — removed from subsequent productions, Lisa says — showed her parents in their living room planning the trip and talking about their physical ailments and the trinkets they would buy. That was juxtaposed with valiant boys shown on a screen, like 'Les Misérables,' marching with their flag, fighting for their freedom."

At the intermission, the manager of the Brooklyn Academy of Music approached the sisters and pointed to Sellars, composer John Adams and librettist Alice Goodman sitting across the theater, saying they would love to meet the Klinghoffers. "I certainly wasn't going to give them that photo op," Lisa says. "We were so enraged."

The archive the Klinghoffer sisters have donated to the American Jewish Historical Society includes thousands of letters, some addressed just to "Marilyn Klinghoffer, New York, NY." One (addressed completely) was from President Ronald Reagan. Among those who paid shivah calls to Marilyn, Ilsa and Lisa were Simon Wiesenthal and Benjamin Netanyahu, at the time Israel's ambassador to the United Nations.

The collection also includes an Achille Lauro dining-room menu that Leon and Marilyn Klinghoffer's friend Sylvia Sherman had in front of her when the gunmen burst in. She sketched the terrorists' faces in the menu's margins.

Abe Foxman, who was in the lobby after the Klinghoffer sisters spoke on Thursday, told Haaretz the murder was important "because it's almost in the same vein as Anne Frank. She put a face on the Holocaust, and the Klinghoffer tragedy puts a face on terrorism."

Speaking on a day when nine Israelis were assaulted in stabbing attacks around Israel, Ilsa added that "terrorism is not an abstract thing. It really happens. And we serve as a reminder."