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Ten years on, pain of Dolphinarium bombing still strong

By RUTH EGLASH
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Lilya Zhukovsky still has a clear memory of the last time she saw her daughter alive: It still feels like "it happened yesterday."

Lilya Zhukovsky has a clear memory of the last time she saw her daughter Marina Berkovsky alive.

"She said she wanted to leave her keys and phone at home because there was nowhere for her to keep them at the nightclub where she was going," recalls Zhukovsky, a veteran immigrant from Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

"She told me to go to sleep and then just wake up to open the door for her. She said I did not have to talk to her but could go straight back to sleep."

But, says Zhukovsky as tears form, she never had the chance to open the door for her daughter, who just a few hours later was blown apart in one of the worst terrorist attacks of the second intifida – the Tel Aviv Dolphinarium bombing of June 1, 2001.

"It is hard for me to talk about this and I am sure it is hard for you to listen," the 61-year-old caregiver says. "I have spoken to groups from America and other places and told them my story about this tragedy that I have suffered. I think it is very important.

"People think that we, Israelis, do not want to live together [with Arabs] in peace, but it is not true, we are just scared and no one thinks about this," she continues.

It still feels like "it happened yesterday," Zhukovsky says.

"It was only the second time in her life that she ever went out at night to a discotheque," she says, adding that her daughter, who had turned 17 just a few weeks before, had been a model student at the nearby Shevet Mofet High School.

Marina was not the only teenager who died that night, when a young Palestinian blew himself up in the midst of a large group of young people waiting to enter the Pasha nightclub on Tel Aviv's seafront. Out of the 21 people killed, 16 were teenagers and most of them, like Marina, were Russian-speaking immigrants from the former Soviet Union. One hundred thirtytwo people were wounded.

"Sometimes at night when I cannot sleep, I replay the events of that evening, before I knew she was dead, over and over in my head like a film," says Zhukovsky, who has a son and now a five-year-old granddaughter.

"I did not understand why the phone kept on ringing and her friends were looking for her," she says, gesturing around her Tel Aviv apartment that is in many ways a shrine to the daughter she lost. "Then someone called and told me that there had been a bomb."

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Zhukovsky remembers switching on the TV to see the destruction and almost immediately starting to call local hospitals to see if Marina was in one of them.

"I gave her description over and over again, but no one had seen her," she says wearily.

"In the end I managed to reach the friend whom she'd gone out with, but she also had not seen her; she told me that the force of the bomb blast had been so strong that they were separated and she could not find Marina."

After hours of phone calls, Marina's friend arrived with her mother and the group set off to search the hospitals.

"We brought a photo but everyone kept telling me that she was not there or they had not seen her, eventually they told me to go to Abu Kabir," says Zhukovsky.

The Institute of Forensic Medicine, which during the bloody years of the intifada became synonymous with such bombings, is always the last place that a parent wants to turn, but, says Zhukovsky, she had no choice.

"I still did not believe that she was dead," she says. "I thought she had probably gone home and was waiting for me there. I asked my friends to take me home, I wanted to go and check."

But when Zhukovsky opened the front door, the house was empty. It took another few hours before Marina's body was finally identified and her mother given the sad news.

At Abu Kabir, Zhukovsky had been introduced to volunteers from SELAH – Israel Crisis Management Center, which provides on-going support and assistance to immigrant victims of terrorism and other tragedies.

"These people gave us everything from their heart and soul," says Zhukovsky, pointing at Natasha, a social worker from SELAH who has become a guiding light in her life over the past 10 years and who has joined us for this interview.

"I've been with SELAH for 10 years, and as a group we always hold ceremonies together and different activities at holiday time," she says, adding that on Wednesday, June 1, parents who lost their children and others who lost loved ones in the attack will gather at the site to pay their respects.

"We do this every year," says Zhukovsky, fingering a heart-shaped necklace that depicts an imprinted photograph of her daughter. "We will meet there at 11 p.m. [the time the bomb exploded] and many young people will come to pay tribute."

Asked how she managed to move forward with her life, Zhukovsky says that she had no choice, "it was either sit at home and just look at the photos or get up and go back to work.

"At the time my daughter was killed I worked with an elderly woman who was 98," recalls Zhukovsky. "She was a wonderful woman but she had lost the will to live. She would just sit there and tell me: '98 is too old, there is no need for me to still be alive.' "I did not understand how this woman did not want to live but my daughter, who was only 17 and had so much to give, to her family, her friends, her country – she did not even have the chance to have children..."

The world is a cruel place, Zhukovsky says. "Of course we want peace and I do not want to see any more people killed or for them to lose their children like I did, but I do not think the Palestinians are able to talk to us now that they are together with Hamas, which says we do not have a right to be here."

She finishes: "I am not a political person and I know there is a lot of pressure, but it is important for us to remain strong. This is our country and there is no other place for us to go."



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