Holocaust survivor saved from Hamas buries son, fears for captive family

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“This is a second Holocaust for me,” said survivor Ruth Haran, 87, who is reliving a childhood nightmare.

Twice now, she has made it out alive from the inferno.

But the death, the destruction and the fear have all returned and come full circle for the great-grandmother, eight decades after the Holocaust.

Her son and two other family members were killed in the Oct. 7 Hamas assault on Israeli communities in southern Israel. Seven other members of her family, including her daughter, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, aged 3 and 8, were kidnapped in the infiltration and dragged back to the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

“They murdered my son. They took my family to Gaza,” she said Monday in an interview with JNS. “Release them.”

“I’m [nearly] 88 years old,” she said as she burst into tears.  “Enough.”

**Reliving childhood horrors**

On the fateful Saturday morning of the Hamas attack that became a national nightmare, Haran was alone in her home in a kibbutz in southwestern Israel, which, like more than two dozen other locations in the region, had been overrun by Palestinian terrorists from Gaza.

She had moved to Kibbutz Be’eri five years ago to be near her son, Avshalom, after her husband passed away, and was also dealing with health issues, including a bout of cancer.

“My son organized a good home for me, in a charming place,” she recounted. “The kibbutz was so beautiful with flowers and views.”

But that morning after the sirens went off indicating incoming rocket attacks, Haran realized something was very wrong. She tried to reach her son by phone but got no answer. Next, she tried her daughter-in-law; again, no response. Her grandchildren didn’t pick up the phone either.

Someone knocked on the door, and she opened it to find two Hamas terrorists in front of her. They were suddenly called away and shut the door.

“I hadn’t seen anything yet,” she recounted. “I didn’t understand what was going on.”

Later in the afternoon, she ventured outside her home (“How long could I wait?” she asked) and was quickly told to go back inside by two security men, instructing her to remain in her sealed room.

She hid out in her home throughout the day, still oblivious to the murderous rampage that was going on outside her house—about 10% of the kibbutz’s 1,100 residents were being massacred. She had the TV on but couldn’t grasp what was being said. It would be 14 hours later before she would be rescued. 

**Rescue**

It was already nighttime when rescuers came into Haran’s home, which, like her life itself, had been inexplicably spared. They took her to a nearby field with other survivors.

“Everything around was damaged and destroyed,” she recounted.

But the worst was yet to come.

At the field, neighbors who had survived the massacre talked of death and murder, women raped and young children killed.

“Everything came back to me,” she recounted.” The whole trauma [of my childhood] was reopened.”

“It was exactly a Shoah,” she said using the Hebrew word for Holocaust, “because only in a Shoah are babies brutally murdered out of pleasure, women, pregnant women, killed or raped, homes burned.”

She would later find out that her son Avshalom, 66, was among the dead. His cell phone, which she had tried to reach him on in vain earlier in the day, was answered by someone in Gaza.

Her horror did not end there.

Haran would also learn that seven members of her family, including her daughter, grandchildren and great-grandchildren, aged 3 and 8, were taken to Gaza and have not been heard from since.

Two other distant relatives visiting from the suburb of Evanston, Ill., outside of Chicago, were later released.

Her granddaughter, who was forcibly taken to Gaza, had long been involved in an organization that brought ill Palestinians from Gaza to Israeli hospitals for medical treatment.

For years, Palestinian laborers had worked on the kibbutz, she said, eating in their dining hall and working in construction, even on her own kitchen.

Today, one month after the attack, the kibbutz, which remains a closed military zone, is, in part, a tableau of carnage, testimony to the death and destruction that struck the desert farming community that autumn holiday weekend.

“I can’t stop crying,” Haran said in a one-room flat, where she has been temporarily relocated, at a retirement center in Beersheba. She was lying in the bed under a green blanket before getting up to do an interview with JNS sitting at her bedside.

**Holocaust childhood**

Ruth Haran was born in Bucharest, Romania in 1935, the youngest of four children. Her mother told her she was born unlucky because the winds of World War II were already stirring.

Her Polish-born father, who was a doctor, was exiled from Romania because he was not a citizen. Her mother was left to tend to the four children alone as violence against Jews mounted.

Later, her mother would take the children in search of her husband. They were eventually reunited after a family member, a train conductor, spotted the father on a train. Her father was given a position by the Communists in a hospital in Odessa, but they had to flee yet again from the approaching Nazis.

Haran recalls the freezing, starving nights on a train during their escape. After years of being on the run, eventually, the family made their way by train and boat to Uzbekistan where they stayed until the end of the war.

In 1945, her father, who was appointed to lead the medical team in Kishinev*,* died of typhus.

“And now the same thing has happened to [my son] Avshalom on the kibbutz,” she said, the tears streaming down her face anew.

**Immigration to Israel**

After her father’s death, Haran’s uncle sent the family money to get back to Romania from Russia. In 1947, the family immigrated illegally to Israel, when the British still ruled what was then Mandatory Palestine, and had severely limited or otherwise completely prevented Jewish immigration.

She remembers coming over on the boat, being given mandarin oranges and then seeing the Bahai Gardens in Haifa. “I thought I was in heaven; it was so beautiful,” she said. The family shared a flat with two others in the northern port city.

“We were so happy that we had a country and that we had a state,” she said.

Even as they flourished in the Holy Land, life was never easy. Over the decades, two members of the family perished in Israel’s wars.

“I admire Israel,” she said holding back her tears. “I am happy to be Israeli.”

**Back home …**

“I didn’t witness the [Nazi] death camps, so it was worse for me now.”

“As a child, we ran away and did not have a home,” Haran said. “This time I will not run away again.  I will return to my home.”

“In the fall, the sunflowers will bloom in the kibbutz, and it will be even more beautiful than it was,” she said. “I want to go back home.”