

Israeli terror widow reunites with S.F. family and tells story to world

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Thirty seconds before everyone in the room died, Arkady Weiselman decided to step out.

Fifteen seconds before everyone in the room died, Weiselman was slicing off a huge piece of cake.

Fifteen seconds after everyone in the room died, Weiselman returned. A suicide bomber had transformed the festive Passover seder into a scene resembling Hieronymus Bosch's depiction of hell.

Thirty people died that day in what came to be known as the Passover massacre of 2002. Weiselman, a chef at the Park Hotel, escaped without a scratch.

"He called immediately on the phone saying God loves him, God loves him, he is safe," recalled Weiselman's widow, Vica, who was in San Francisco this week for a reunion with an uncle and a cousin — as well as to tell her story to the city's émigré community.

"I think it was just a miracle."

She pauses for a moment and tears well up in her large eyes.

"But nobody knew this miracle was not going to last a long time."

Six weeks after the bombing, Arkady Weiselman decided to take a break from the images of severed limbs and dying people that were haunting him and go for a walk to the Netanya farmer's market. While he was buying vegetables, a suicide bomber detonated just a few meters away.

Arkady and Vica Weiselman had emigrated to Israel from Ukraine in 1990 in hope of a better life and a brighter future for their two daughters. Now he was dead and she was raising them alone while caring for Weiselman's cancer-stricken parents and her own ailing father. And she was flat broke.

"When your leg is broken, everyone can see. And there is a support or a cane. But when your heart is wounded, no one can see," said Vica Weiselman, through Russian translator Natasha Marselly, an activity coordinator at the Jewish Family and Children's Services office in San Francisco's Outer Sunset district.

"For a broken heart there is only love

and friendship."

Weiselman, now 40, received both — as well as much-needed financial aid and counseling — from SELAH, an organization that aids members of Israel's immigrant communities who have been victimized by terror. Through JFCS, the Bay Area émigré community has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for SELAH, and Weiselman was the keynote speaker at the Émigré Community Gala on Saturday, Jan. 27, which was attended by more than 500.

"When we moved, we didn't have furniture, not even mattresses. SELAH bought furniture for both of my children. And when my father got sick, they paid for his rehabilitation in a hospital," said Weiselman.

The organization also paid for Arkady's funeral. And, several months later, it invited Weiselman and her two children to a retreat solely for Israelis who had lost a loved one in a terror attack. Surrounded by busloads of people who understood her situation all too well, Weiselman finally used a word to describe herself she

hadn't been able to until then: A widow.

While in San Francisco, Weiselman caught up with the family members she last saw in 1998, when she was out here on a vacation, with Arkady; it seems a lifetime ago because so much has changed since then. But, she emphasizes, the major reason she is in America is to say thank you to those whose donations helped pull her out of the abyss.

"I don't know what kind of life I would have if my husband would be alive. But today ..." She pauses. "Today I am alive. We live our lives only because of love and support. And I am not the only one. I am just one of many people who was helped."

And despite the way things have turned out, Weiselman doesn't regret moving to Israel for one second. Not even for a fraction of a second.

"No, I have no regrets. I want my great grandchildren and the great-grandchildren of my great-grandchildren to live in Israel."

For more information about SELAH, visit www.selah.org.il or call the S.F.-based JFCS at (415) 449-1200. ■



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Vica Weiselman