

Aged Victim, Portrayed as Helpless, Is Recalled as a Strong, Happy Man

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pg. 8

The Hijackers’ Fate: The View From the Pentagon

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By SARA RIMER

Leon Klinghoffer has become known around the world as the frail, elderly American shot to death in his wheelchair and thrown overboard from an Italian cruise ship in the Mediterranean. But yesterday, as they awaited the arrival of his widow in the Manhattan apartment where so much had been shared, his daughters and other relatives talked about the Leon Klinghoffer who was most of all a strong family man.

“He was a contented, happy man,” said his mother-in-law, Rose Windwehr, who met him 40 years ago when her nephew brought him to dinner at her home in East Orange, N.J. “He loved his friends and family.”

Gathered together at 70 East 10th Street, Mrs. Windwehr and Mr. Klinghoffer’s daughters — Ilisa, 28 years old, and Lisa, 34 — and the others consoled themselves by remembering, not how Leon Klinghoffer had died but how he had lived. They looked at photographs of him and his wife Marilyn and the children, and they laughed at small memories, like his fondness for the television show “Dynasty.” “He was addicted to ‘Dynasty,’” Lisa said. “Joan Collins — wow!”

Lisa, an artist whose oil paintings fill the apartment, remembered how her father encouraged her during a difficult period in her career. “A couple of weeks ago — and I’ll never forget this — he sat me down,” she said. “He said, ‘Lisa, you have to have faith in yourself. It’s going to happen for you.’”

A Long Struggle

He struggled all of his life, in his youth to overcome his humble beginnings on the Lower East Side and succeed in business, in later years to recover from the stroke that left him paralyzed on the right side. He was born on Sept. 24, 1916, one of five children of Pinchas and Lena Klinghoffer, Eastern European immigrants who owned a hardware store on Avenue D.

Pinchas Klinghoffer was only 29 when he died, and from an early age, Leon and his brother Albert worked to support the family in the hardware store — Klinghoffer Supply.

Eventually they took it over and moved to a bigger store at Avenue A and East Fourth Street. Together they founded a small appliance manufacturing company that made everything from fans to rotobroilers — the brothers’ own invention, a box that contained a rotisserie and a heating element.

It was shortly after Leon came to dinner at the Windwehr home that he attended the wedding of Mrs. Windwehr’s nephew and there met her daughter Marilyn again. “All of a sudden I looked for Marilyn, and she wasn’t there,” Mrs. Windwehr recalled. “Leon was gone, too. About an hour later, she came back, and I said, ‘Marilyn, where have you been?’ She said, ‘I just went for a walk with Leon Klinghoffer.’ From then on, it was a romance.”

The only potential obstacle that anyone could see was that Marilyn lived in New Jersey. “Leon was a fellow, he didn’t travel much,” Mrs. Windwehr said. “For him to take out a girl from New Jersey, that was like climbing the Himalayas.”

They were married on Sept. 18, 1949. A framed black-and-white photograph of the bride — a beautiful, dark-haired, young woman in a traditional wedding gown — is on the coffee table in the Klinghoffers’ living room. Mrs. Windwehr can still quote from the letter her daughter sent from Bermuda, where the couple honeymooned. “She wrote, ‘Mama, how can it be bad with names like Klinghoffer and Windwehr?’”

It is now a family legend how Leon intervened 13 years ago to save the relationship between Lisa and her former boyfriend, Jerry Arbittier. “We’d had a big fight and broken up,” Lisa said. Upset, she had returned to her parents’ home in Manhattan from Philadelphia, where she was in art school and where Mr. Arbittier had lived.

Fortunately, her father had also just returned, back early from a vacation, as usual, to make sure all was running smoothly at the factory. “He said to me: ‘I’m going to do it this one time,’” Lisa said. “And he got on the Metro-liner to go see Jerry in Philadelphia.” “I don’t remember what he said,” Mr. Arbittier recalled. “But an hour and a half after he got there, I was driving him back to New York.” Mr. Arbittier and Lisa were married about a year later.

Everyone in the family went to Leon for advice, and Ilisa consulted him soon after she met her fiancé, Paul Dworin, last winter. “All I said was: ‘So? What do you think?’” she said. “He just winked and said, ‘This is the one.’”

The entire family speaks of the courage with which Mr. Klinghoffer overcame two strokes several years ago. “He taught himself how to do everything with his left hand,” said Dr. Jill Spiegel, the daughter of one of his oldest friends, Charlotte Spiegel. “He never once complained.”

After the stroke, Mrs. Klinghoffer, 58, devoted herself to making her hus-

band’s life as comfortable as possible. “If they wanted to go somewhere, she quietly checked things out beforehand,” Ilisa said. “She’d call and say, ‘How many steps are there going to be?’”

“Before this trip, she called the cruise line and found out the width of the doors to make sure his wheelchair could go through,” Mrs. Windwehr said.

With a cane, he could walk short distances. “He walked slowly,” Dr. Spiegel said, “and she never walked ahead.”

And so the family finds it particularly cruel that the two who were inseparable in life were, according to the accounts, separated at the end, by the hijackers.

Mother’s Call

Ilisa and Lisa spoke to their mother on the telephone from Cairo for the second time on Thursday night. “She kept asking, ‘Is Grandma all right?’” Lisa said. “And she told us, ‘I’m going to need you — you have to be strong.’”

President Reagan telephoned Ilisa and Lisa yesterday to offer his condolences and to say that their father was an American of whom everyone could be proud. Letters and telegrams have poured in from all over the country.

The letters help, Ilisa said. “Someone wrote, ‘It could have been my father,’” she said.

“But it wasn’t,” Lisa said. “It was our father.”

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Associated Press

HEADING HOME: Mildred and Frank Hodes, at left, and Viola Melskin waiting in Cairo for a military flight back to United States. U.S. officials said Mrs. Hodes had been targeted for death by hijackers.