

SPORTS

NYC Marathon runner honors Holocaust survivor mom with henna tattoo of Auschwitz numbers

Svetlana Shkolnikova NorthJersey

Published 12:22 p.m. ET Nov. 1, 2018 | Updated 4:49 p.m. ET Nov. 1, 2018

The number was pierced into Devorah Hilsenrath's skin shortly after Passover.

A13480.

The "A" was a new addition to the identification system at Auschwitz. It was introduced in 1944 to mark the nearly half million Jews arriving at the concentration camp from Hungary.

Hilsenrath, her parents and her two siblings were among them. Only Hilsenrath, then 14, survived.

On Sunday, 74 years after Hilsenrath became Hungarian prisoner no. 13,480, her daughter, Rochelle Goldschmiedt, of Teaneck, will run the New York City Marathon with the number tattooed in henna on her upper left forearm.

The tattoo, Goldschmiedt said, will honor her mother and give her the strength to finish.

"Running the marathon was a huge challenge for me, not only physically but emotionally. Everybody has challenges in their life but I feel that if you have the sheer will and determination emotionally to overcome something, it can be done," Goldschmiedt said.

"Seeing the horror that my mother went through and the fact that she survived and moved on and had a family and has children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren shows that anybody can be survivor and go on to thrive in their life."

The numbers are a constant source of inspiration for Goldschmiedt, accompanying her in henna form through two previous New York City marathons and the New York City Triathlon. She wears them as a gold bracelet, given to her by her daughters Yael Schwartzbard and Tamar Hersko, daily.

The name of her mother's little sister, Gabriella, has also become a fixture on her arm. Goldschmiedt is named after Gabriella's Hebrew name, Rachel.

Goldschmiedt will run for the first time Sunday with "Gabriella" written on her shirt. Her namesake was killed upon arrival in Auschwitz at 9 years old.

"The spectators will call her name over and over again," Goldschmiedt said. "Every time they mention her name will keep her memory alive."

This year's marathon will also take on an unexpected poignancy in the wake of the shooting Saturday in a Pittsburgh synagogue, she said. The attack, the deadliest on Jews in U.S. history, killed 11 worshippers.

"What happened in Pittsburgh will give me even more purpose to not be embarrassed of who I am," Goldschmiedt said. "It certainly makes me feel that I want to shout even louder that I'm Jewish, I want people to know it's not something I would ever want to be ashamed of. It doesn't make me hide. It makes me scared – I'm not going to say I'm not scared – but it doesn't change my beliefs and my faith in God."

Lowry: This time a synagogue in Pittsburgh

Synagogues: Jews grapple with idea of armed guards in spiritual havens

Keeping the story alive: The story of 10 Capuchin friars who went from a Nazi concentration camp to Ringling Manor

Hilsenrath, now 88, said her heart hurt when she read about the shooting.

"One Jewish person killed is like killing a thousand of us because we lost so many," she said. "How can this happen in America?"

Hilsenrath has never seen her daughter run in the marathon but said she is profoundly moved by Goldschmiedt's decision to display her Auschwitz number. She blesses her daughter before any long run.

Story continues below gallery.

"I can't even tell you what deep emotions it brought about in me," Hilsenrath said. "I've never seen anybody do this to tell you the truth. I have met lots of Holocaust survivors but nobody's child had their number put on their arms. It must take a very special soul."

Her mother's experience has always weighed heavily on Goldschmiedt. Out of Hilsenrath's four children, Goldschmiedt said she seems to have been affected the most.

"If I were to define who I am, I certainly would say I'm a Holocaust survivor's child because I really feel it's a part of my DNA," she said. "It's a part of who I am."

Years passed before Hilsenrath told her children about her childhood.

She first started telling her story at Passover, a holiday that celebrates the liberation of the Jews from Egyptian slavery, and gradually, began speaking at local schools.

"She felt it was her responsibility, her duty to talk about her history and what happened," Goldschmiedt said.

Hilsenrath talked about her home near the Carpathian Mountains, her close-knit family and about a moment when a teenage Hungarian boy called her a Communist when she was 5.

Anti-Semitism was rampant even before the arrival of the Germans, Hilsenrath said.

When the Nazis invaded, Hilsenrath and her family were forced out of their house and into a neighborhood synagogue. They were told the move was temporary. A month later, they were packed into a train with no toilets, food or water and transported on a "nightmarish trip" to Auschwitz.

The family was separated at the concentration camp. Hilsenrath's father and brother were sent to one line, her mother and sister to another and because she was tall for her age, Hilsenrath was placed into a line solely for adult women.

It was the last time she saw her family.

Hilsenrath's head was shaved. She was given a striped dress and shoes that were too small for her. She worked 12 hours per day at a munitions factory. She lived.

As the Soviet Union's army approached Auschwitz in January 1945, the Germans emptied the camp and sent prisoners on a 40-mile death march.

"If you couldn't walk, the Nazis shot at your feet," Hilsenrath said.

One day during the march, Hilsenrath and an older cousin, the only surviving member of her extended family, noticed an underground bunker nearby. At night, as the German guards slept, they successfully made their escape.

Hilsenrath returned to her childhood home after the war to find it occupied by a German. She lived with an aunt for several years awaiting the return of her family.

They never came, and in 1948, Hilsenrath left Hungary to join other extended family in New York City. She married a rabbi and later settled in Highland Park.

Hilsenrath's story was documented for both the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

Goldschmiedt's story prompted the New York Road Runners, a nonprofit running organization, to select her for this year's #MovedMe team of inspirational runners. She will be honored Friday at the opening ceremony of the New York City Marathon.

Goldschmiedt anticipates more marathons in her future. As a retired personal trainer, she loves being in training mode. She loves the feeling of incredible accomplishment at the end. And she loves the sense of peace it gives her.

"I feel blessed, grateful that I'm capable of doing such a run," Goldschmiedt said. "You're really able to step back and think about your life and how much you have to be grateful for: your family, your children, your mom."

Email: shkolnikova@northjersey.com, Twitter: @svetashko