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Daughter's book about the holocaust celebrates the survivors among us

By Darcell Brown For MediaNews Group
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A 2012 photo of Lori Ellis' mother, Sophie Klisman, who was forced from her home by Nazis when she was a child. (Naturally Photography)

Lori Ellis always looked up to her mother, Sophie Klisman, as a positive role model — an outgoing and positive person. At age 90, Klisman is of sound mind and physical health, and winning gold medals at the Senior Olympics.

Ellis, who lives in West Bloomfield Township, thought she knew her mother well. But her mother had a secret she kept from her family. One day when Ellis was out of town, Sophie recorded a video testimony about her past that was to be featured in Monni and Sabrina Must's book, "Living Witnesses: Faces of the Holocaust."

In 1939, when Sophie was just 10 years old, the Nazi army came to her town with tanks and guns and forced all of the Jewish people to evacuate their homes. Sophie was sent along with thousands of other Jews and Romanis to the Lodz ghetto in Poland, where crowding and isolation from the outside led many of them to die slow from starvation and rampant disease. By 1940, 163,777 people were locked into 1.5 square miles, where they were forced to manufacture weapons for the German war effort. Sophie's parents and brother died at Lodz.



An entry gate at the Auschwitz concentration camp complex reads in German, "Work makes (you) free." (xiquinhosilva CC BY 2.0) Xiquinho

Then, at age 14, she was transferred to her first concentration camp — Auschwitz, also in German-occupied Poland. That complex of camps, one of the best preserved and recognized of the Nazis' more than 1,200 camps throughout Europe, was liberated by the Soviet Army 75 years ago on Jan. 27.

The horrors she had seen and the death of her own family and others were almost too much to bear. But Sophie lied about her age and was allowed to live at Auschwitz and stay with her sister. Another brother wasn't so lucky.



The gatehouse of Auschwitz II, also known as Auschwitz II-Birkenau, a Nazi German extermination camp in occupied Poland during the Holocaust. The building is preserved by the Auschwitz-Birkenau museum. These tracks lead through the gate to an unloading ramp and the gas chambers. (pzk net CC BY 3.0)

After about two weeks, the sisters were transferred again, to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northern Germany, where Sophie suffered with strep throat but was given no medicine. After four to five weeks, they were moved again, east to Salzwedel, a satellite of Neuengamme concentration camp.

On April 14, 1945, she was released when U.S. troops liberated Salzwedel. Even then, she had to wait four more years in a German displaced persons camp until she obtained immigration papers and could travel to the United States.

When Ellis accompanied her mother to the Musts' book signing, her mother let her read a few paragraphs about her life during the war.

"Since I had hardly any knowledge about what my parents went through I wanted to learn and share it with my family," Ellis says.

So she set out to research more about her family tree and the Holocaust. She started her research at the memory project, Jewishgen.org, ancestry.com and with help from Feiga Weiss, a librarian at the Holocaust Memorial Center.

As she learned more about her family background, Ellis felt compelled to write a book about what she'd found. Not just to document her family history, but to educate the world on the dangers of anti-Semitism, hatred and prejudice.

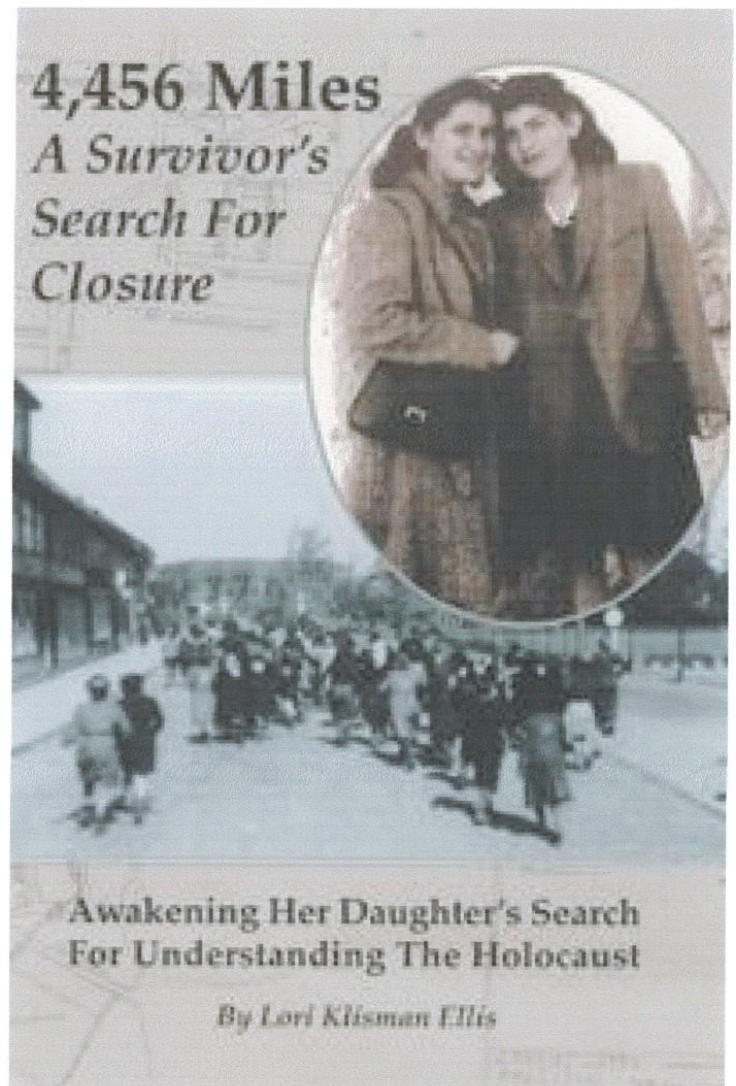
Her book, "4,456 Miles: A Survivor's Search For Closure-Awakening Her Daughter's Search For Understanding the Holocaust," documents her mother's and aunt's oral testimony. She writes of her mother's courage to travel back to Poland in 2016 with her children, where she was able to finally place a tombstone in the exact spot where her family was buried.

On this trip, Klisman finally got to thank her own mother for saving her life. In 2019, she was the spokeswoman for the Friends of the Israeli Defense Forces.

"I see my mom as a heroine, a true inspiration, brave and an optimistic person," Ellis says.

With anti-Jewish hate crimes in the news again, she says it is important to remember the past.

"People today should know history tends to repeat itself unless you educate people on what hatred and prejudice can do to others," she says. "People need to know everyone is equal. Discrimination and intolerance should never be tolerated."



Lori Klisman Ellis wrote a book about her mother's Holocaust experiences. (independently published)

She plans to donate a portion of proceeds from sales of her book to the Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation. (auschwitzinstitute.org)

Mother and daughter say they would like to leave readers with this thought: "Never forget the 6 million beautiful men, women, and children who perished due to hatred and prejudice. Be the one to make a positive impact in this world."

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