Introduction by Leo Bretholz

On the night of Nov. 6, 1942, en route to the almost certain end of my life, I escaped between iron bars on a cramped freight train carrying a thousand Innocents to the German death camp at Auschwitz.

As my friend Manfred Silberwasser and I clung to couplings at the back of the rumbling car, and waited for our moment to leap into the French countryside, I had only vague notions of the events to follow: for the frightened souls left inside, mass murder within a few days; for me, a life on the run, barely eluding those who wished to kill me for the crime of being Jewish.

As Manfred and I waited for a curve in the track, and the slowing of the train, I had no notion that nearly six decades later, I would put those years into a book LEAP INTO DARKNESS, co-authored with Michael Olesker.

That night in 1942, I saw my mother's face before me in the darkness. I saw her sending me away from Vienna, the city of my birth, four years earlier when the Nazi's began rounding up Jewish males. I was seventeen when I swam...
fully clothed across a cold, torrential German river, and began my
running. My mother and my two younger sisters remained behind in
Vienna. I never saw them again.

My book is a remembrance of those left behind, and those years on
the run trying to avoid deportation -- escapes and captures,
miserable camps, barbed wires and beatings, crossing the French
Alps into Switzerland on bloody, frozen feet, only to be turned back
at the border, and finally working in the French Underground.

I reached America in 1947, and kept my little piece of the war to
myself. I am of a generation that maintained its own counsel for too
long. To talk about the past was to expose ourselves to its pain, and
to attempt sharing that which seemed to have no language. To push
my story behind me was my attempt to outrun it.

When I married in 1952, I began to tell my wife some details of my
past. She listened, and gently coaxed more out of me. I began to
feel unanticipated relief.

It was October 1962, before the war officially ended for me.
Seventeen years after the organized killings ended, I finally received
official notification that my mother and sisters had indeed been put to
death by the Nazi murder machine.

“It was March 16, 1938. Four days earlier, the German
army entered
Austria, and Austria
ceased to exist. The
world cringed for a
moment, and then
went about its own
business, which it
still imagined was
separate from ours.”
I began to feel some sense of closure. I wrote newspaper Op-ed articles about the war, and gave talks to school gatherings. Friends urged me to put my experiences into longer forms.

By the 1970s I went into the retail book business in Baltimore. I had been an avid reader all my life, and here I was, surrounded by billions of words. None of them were my own. Surely, in a world in which humanity tells stories to itself, in a sea of language that was my daily environment, my story should count for something.

The literature of the Holocaust is substantial, but far from complete. "Leap Into Darkness" is but a footnote to the six million Jews put to death, but such footnotes complete the mosaic. Mine is a story of family tragedy, yes, but also of defiance -- and triumph. A people did not march quietly to the ovens. Many of us resisted, fought, ran, and fought some more, grew up, fell in love, struggled to stay alive, found unforeseen courage, and persevered.

One of my book store customers was Michael Olesker. For years, he urged me to write my story. In 1997 we agreed to write it together. "Leap Into Darkness" is my unburdening, and also my letter of gratitude to priests who hid me and endangered their own lives in the process; to an old woman on crutches, who emboldened my friend and me to leap from that death train; to relatives who embraced me in the most difficult hours; and to a nun, Sister Jeanne d'Arc, who gave me strength long ago at a most vulnerable moment.

Also, it is my shout to the heavens, where my mother must surely be watching over me. I am safe, Mama, and here is what happened after you forced me to run.

Leo Bretholz
Guiding Questions to Ponder

Introduction

1. How does Leo’s father deal with the anti-Semitic comment on the bus ride to his Grandmother Sarah’s apartment? Do you think a similar response would have happened in late 1938? Explain.
2. What significance does the name Sarah have in Austria after the German Anschluss?
3. What caused Leo’s self-assured relatives to “cringe” in their apartment rooms?
4. For what reasons did some Austrian Jews, including Aunt Charlotte, have for not fleeing to other countries after 1938?

Chapter One

1. What does Leo mean when he states, “The world cringed for a moment, and then went about its own business, which it still imagined was separate from ours”?
2. Frequently, Austrians view themselves as “the first victims of Nazi Germany.” How does that statement compare or contrast with Leo’s description of the arrival of the German military?
3. Describe the scene of Hitler’s arrival in Vienna from Leo’s perspective.
4. What happens to Cousin Martha and Uncle Moritz at this time?
5. What do you think Leo means when he says “the world’s rules of civility had been canceled”?
6. The persecution of the Jewish population in Vienna begins almost immediately after the Anschluss. Why do you think this happened?
7. Give several examples of the acts of intimidation and violence directed toward the Jewish citizens of Vienna. How do some Austrian Jews react?
8. How is the decision made for Leo to flee Austria? What were some of the conflicts and challenges he faced in making his decision?
9. Discuss the Ezra Committee. What was their purpose? How did they assist people fleeing Germany and Austria?
10. Describe the scene when Leo says good-bye to his sister Ditta.

Chapter Two

1. Leo continues his story with his departure from his mother and sister Henny, as well as other family members. Describe the scene.
2. Leo’s train trip from Austria takes him through which country?
3. Describe the initial reaction of the Catholic Church to the arrival of Hitler. How was the Church in Vienna affected within a short time?
4. How does the street scene in Trier, Germany, compare with Vienna?
5. Where does Leo find shelter in Trier? Who is his roommate? How do they get along?
6. Who is Becker? What, do you think, motivates a man like him?
7. Leo must leave his suitcase behind, but brings what with him on his journey? What explanation do you have for this?
8. Describe how Leo crosses from Germany into Luxembourg. Who is waiting for him there?

Chapter Three

1. With whom does Leo stay in Luxembourg? What kind of reception does he receive?
2. Even though war has not broken out, Leo “must be careful” in Luxembourg. Why?
3. Discuss what happens to Leo when he goes downstairs for some breakfast at the café.
4. Contrast the treatment Leo receives after being arrested in Luxembourg with his described treatment in Vienna.
5. What are the three choices Leo is given after being arrested? Which does he choose?

“The police glanced about the room, and then began moving from table to table. ‘Papiers?’ they asked. They wanted documents, identification. I had none.”
6. When Leo reaches a group of Jewish refugees in France, why are they reluctant to let him stay? What does Leo then do?
7. The Ezra Committee now needs to move Leo to Belgium. Why is this step necessary?
8. Describe the scene in the car on the way to Belgium. How does Becker try to keep everyone calm?
9. As they travel along the Belgium border they can see the night sky lit up in Germany. What had happened?

Chapter Four

1. What was the event that touched off Kristallnacht?
2. According to Leo, what was the lesson of Kristallnacht? Is this lesson supported by the historical record?
3. In Antwerp, how does the Ezra Committee assist Leo? Is this different from his experience with the committee in Luxembourg?
4. Who does Leo meet in the soup kitchen?
5. Where does Leo stay in Antwerp? Describe his new home.

Chapter Five

1. Describe the personality of Uncle David. How does the relationship between him and Leo develop?
2. Why does Palestine play such an important role in the lives of Leo’s friends and family? What significance does Palestine have for most of Europe’s Jewish population?
3. What evidence does Leo give that Antwerp is a city where Jewish residents can feel comfortable and safe?
4. In what way are the Frajermauers related to Leo? How do they greet Leo?
5. Who is Anny?
6. What is Leo’s ultimate destination? Who lives there?
7. Leo finally feels he can “stop running.” Why?
8. What was the event that caused great tension between Leo and Uncle David?
9. What is the response from Heinz regarding Leo’s suitcase? Why, from Leo’s description of Heinz, do you think he responded this way?
10. What happens to the relationship between Leo and Anny?
11. What news is announced on September 1, 1939? What does Leo learn about the Polish Jewish population?
12. On May 9, 1940, Leo enters the hospital for hernia surgery. It never happens. Why?
13. Leo is arrested on May 10, 1940. The Belgian official said to Leo, “the law is the law.” What would you say is the difference between “the letter of the law” and the “spirit of the law?” Which applied to Leo in this case?
14. What problem did the Belgians face in arresting foreign nationals?

Chapter Six

1. Describe the conditions in Europe at the beginning of chapter six.
2. How do Leo and the other persons on the train explain the actions of civilians on train platforms who appear to be angry? What is one man seen doing?
3. Leo and the other passengers on the train arrive at St. Cyprien. Describe its location and the conditions which awaited them.
4. What was the day to day routine life like for the internees at St. Cyprien?
5. On June 22, 1940 Marshal Henri-Philippe Petain signed an armistice with Germany. Based on your knowledge of World War II, how will this development fundamentally alter Leo’s situation?
6. During the summer of 1940, many died at St. Cyprien. What was the cause?
7. Describe Leo’s escape from St. Cyprien. What conditions made it possible for Leo’s escape? Where did he head to?

Chapter Seven

1. How did Leo find the Frajermauers in Luchon? How was he greeted by them?
2. Compare the conditions in Luchon with those in St. Cyprien.
3. How does Joseph deal with the shortage of soap and other products?
4. Leo writes that while leaving Rosh Hashanah services, a man approached him and stated, “Oh, you are Jewish, you look like one of us”. What question does this raise in Leo’s mind? What are the larger implications of this statement in the experience of the Holocaust?
5. Thus far in Leo’s story, Leo has recurring feelings of guilt. Describe some of those episodes.
6. In what capacity do Leo and fellow refugees work in order to earn food?
7. In Bagneres, Joseph once again finds a way to obtain food for his family. How does he accomplish this?
8. How does Leo establish communication with his mother in Austria?
9. How does Leo hear of news regarding the war in Europe? Describe some of the events that Leo hears about.
10. Who were the Einsatzgruppen? What does Leo learn of them?
11. Leo writes that life turned worse for him in Bagneres. Why does Leo come to that conclusion?

12. Leo receives notice that he is approved to immigrate to the United States. What is ironic about the date he is to report to the U.S. consulate in Marseilles? What happened and how does it affect Leo?

Chapter Eight

1. How is France responding to the Jewish population under its control?
2. What would be the consequence of not registering with the French authorities?
3. Leo and the others moved to what town?
4. What was Drancy? What does Leo know of “camps in the east”?
5. When the mayor of Cauterets leaks word of a raid, what does Leo do?
6. Describe the scene between Anny and the policeman. What choices are reflected in the scene?
7. After the raid, Leo must leave. Where does he go?
8. What identity does Leo take when in Bagneres? Who assists him in obtaining a new identity card? Where does Leo intend to go?
9. Describe Leo’s trek across the mountains.
10. Why does Leo state, “for thirty marvelous minutes, Switzerland was glorious”? What happened?
11. Describe how the border guards treat Leo and Hershkowitz. What is the end result of being arrested by the Swiss border guards? Where are they sent?
12. Why does Leo say he has gone nearly “full circle”? What are conditions like at Rivesaltes? Give several examples.
13. After 20 days at Rivesaltes, Leo is sent where? What does he do in an unsuccessful attempt to avoid being sent away?

Chapter Nine

1. Describe the setting of Drancy. What were the three scenarios that Leo said faced the inmates at Drancy? What was Leo’s conclusion?
2. By the time Leo arrives at Drancy, how much time has elapsed since his decision to flee Vienna? How old is Leo at the time he is in Drancy?
3. Describe what happened to the Jewish population of Paris in August 1942?
4. Seven thousand people were taken to the Velodrome d’Hiver. Explain what had transpired which led to this development.
5. Hundreds of children were held in Drancy. How does Leo describe their experience?
6. What was the role of the French authorities in rounding up the French Jewish population? What, do you think, accounts for this?
7. How does Leo hear of extermination camps in the East? What are the reactions of his fellow inmates?
8. The chapter ends with Leo making a decision. What is it? What reasons do others have for not making the same decision?

Chapter Ten

1. Why does Leo say that those who believe in “resettlement” are dreamers? What evidence, up to this point in the story, supports this assumption?
2. Leo is boarding Transport No. 42, destination Auschwitz. How does Leo describe his fellow “passengers” on the train?
3. Explain the sights, sounds, and smells of the cattle-car Leo is in.
4. To escape from the train, Leo and Manfred had to move the bars in the window. How did they accomplish this task?
5. The final words of chapter ten become the title of the book. What are their possible (or likely) meanings?

Chapter Eleven

1. After Leo and Manfred jump into the darkness, what happens to the train?
2. When Leo and Manfred reach a village, whose door do they knock on? Why?
3. Where does the baker take Leo and Manfred? What is the dilemma they face in going there?
4. How does the priest react to Leo and Manfred’s presence? Where does he send them?
5. Leo and Manfred board a train bound for where?
6. In Paris, Leo and Manfred find refuge with whom?
7. How does Leo obtain identity papers? What is Leo’s new name?
8. Where do Leo and Manfred go to after leaving Paris? Why do they have some sense of relative safety after crossing the Loire River?
9. What happens to the two men after the gendarmes stop them?
10. After Manfred and Leo split up, where is Leo’s next destination?

Chapter Twelve
1. Under what circumstances does Leo manage to escape from the officer while in Bagneres?
2. With whom does Leo find shelter? What does he learn about the Frajermauers?
3. How does Leo discover that he cannot “outrun his fate?” What happens to him? How do the local authorities react to Leo’s situation?
4. Compare Leo’s treatment by the French authorities in Drancy with that at the Maison d’Arret de Tarbes. What do you think might account for this?
5. After being sentenced to one year in prison, what is Leo’s next move?
6. How is Leo caught yet once again? What does this say about the choices made by the French people so far in the story?
7. Why does Leo receive a beating when taken into custody? Why does he undergo a second beating?
8. What medical condition has Leo lived with for the past three years?
9. Describe Leo’s time in solitary confinement. How does he pass the time?
10. What does Leo learn of Anny’s whereabouts during his stay in prison?
11. Anticipating being released from prison, where does Leo learn he is to go?
Chapter Thirteen

1. What is the name of the next camp that Leo finds himself in? What, does he find out, is the purpose of this camp?
2. Leo finds himself relieved of the “wheelbarrow” work. Why?
3. What was the relationship between the prisoners and the guards?
4. Leo receives a visitor while in the camp. Who is it?
5. What reasons does Werner have for not escaping with Leo from the train?
6. How did the police know to look for Leo at Jacques’ home?
7. How do the Marxes assist Leo?
8. Why does Leo feel somewhat more secure after leaving the Marxes’ home? What does he have that Manfred arranged for him?
9. Describe the greeting that Aunt Erna gives Leo when he arrives in Paris?
10. What identity does Leo now have?
11. What indications are there that the Allies might be winning the war?
12. Why does Leo leave the relative safety of Paris and move on?
13. Leo visits his uncle Leon in Pau. Describe the scene.

Chapter Fourteen

1. Leo finds his way to the Frajermauers and Anny. Describe the reunion. What might explain this change?
2. Leo decides to go to Limoges. What is his reason for doing so?
3. Describe some of the activities that Leo performs for the resistance.
4. What was The Sixth?
5. While at a train station, Leo is apprehended by the SS. How does he manage to avoid arrest?
6. How does Leo find himself in a hospital in May 1944?
7. Leo awakens and finds that hernia surgery had been performed. What does Sister Jeanne D’Arc whisper to Leo?
8. On the evening of June 5, 1944, Leo hears on the radio “Grandmother is riding her bicycle around the barn three times…” Of what significance is this?
9. How do the Germans react to the local population after the events of June 6, 1944?
10. What horrible event occurred at Oradour?

Chapter Fifteen

1. What falls from the sky, which excites the people in Chalus? What information does it bring?
2. How does liberation come to Limoges? How did the Germans who were captured react to the role reversal?
3. When news came that the war has ended, what is the reaction of Leo and many others who work with him?
4. Leo says that the “continent was a graveyard, and I escaped my own grave by inches, and in my head I was still running in ways I didn’t yet understand”. What might be some of those ways Leo hints at?
5. Leo says the end of the war brought on a “great unknown”. What do you think he meant?
6. Leo immigrates to the United States in January 1947. Before he leaves, where does he travel? For what purpose?
7. What does Uncle David give to Leo? What news does he have of Anny?
8. Why do Leo and Uncle David avoid discussing the events that took place during the war?
9. Leo’s story ends with his arrival in New York in January 1947. What challenges might the survivors of the Holocaust face who must start over again?

Epilogue

1. Review the fate of Leo’s family. Who survived and who did not?
2. What accounts for Leo’s survival during the war?
3. How does Leo begin to rebuild his life? Where does he find work?
4. Who is Flo?
5. What is the family secret that Leo finally discovers?
6. The Jewish Community Council of Vienna sends Leo a message in

“Two gendarmes were there. I was handed my civilian clothing...(they) took me in handcuffs to an overnight holding cell. The next morning the three of us went to my new destination. It was not freedom at all. It was a hard labor camp.”
Activities

Leap Into Darkness provides the student with many opportunities to further study the Holocaust. Some of those activities include:

- Create a family chart of Leo's family and list their fates.

- Report on the role played by the Vichy Government in France and government policy in Switzerland. How do those countries confront their past? How do they come to terms with their actions?

- Create a graphic organizer giving examples from the story regarding collaborators, perpetrators, bystanders, and rescuers.

- Report on anti-Semitism historically in Europe, as well as anti-Semitism today.

- Research Jewish life in prewar Europe. Compare and contrast Jewish life in Western and Northern Europe with that in Eastern Europe.

- Research the following: Evian Conference (p.36), Nuremberg Laws (p.38), St. Cyprien, Ezra Committee, the resistance (p. 248), the role of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Europe, postwar immigration to the United States, Israel and other countries.

- Write a letter to Leo describing the lessons that one can learn from his story.

Web Resources

The following websites are useful for exploring more about the times that Leo's story takes place as well as the Holocaust in general.

Leo and Freddie Knoller head for the American consulate in Bordeaux to obtain their U.S. visas, December 1946.
www.ushmm.org The premier site for Holocaust study is the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC.

http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/life_after_holocaust/ Excellent introduction to the challenges facing survivors after the war and beyond.

http://voices.iit.edu/ This site allows one to hear testimony from survivors.

http://yadvashem.org/ Website of Israel's national museum of the Holocaust.


http://lastexpression.northwestern.edu/ - Holocaust art.

http://orpheus.ucsd.edu/specoll/dspolitic/Frame.htm - Dr. Seuss Goes to War.


http://special.lib.umn.edu/swha/IMAGES/home.html - U.S. Social hygiene posters.

http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/ - University of South Florida teacher resource.

This memoir is that rarest of all survivors: a man who jumped from a train on his way to a death camp. The reader is with Bretholz at every step, following with mounting tension his struggle to escape.

-Raul Hilberg


http://www.jewishpartisans.org/  - Students and teachers can submit questions to partisans as well as learn about the partisan experience.

www.chapman.edu/holocausteducation/forteachers.asp  - Chapman University's Holocaust resource page.

http://www.eugenicsarchive.org/eugenics/  - This site helps to explain the eugenics movement in the early 20th century.

http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/posters2.htm  - This site has a large collection of propaganda posters from the Nazi era.

Credits

Fred "Skip" Aldrich, a history teacher for the past 29 years. Skip has studied the Holocaust in Poland and Israel and has conducted teacher training in Holocaust education on behalf of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Anti-Defamation League, and the California Center for Excellence on the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, Human Rights, and Tolerance. He is a member of the Regional Education Corps of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC. Skip is currently teaching at John C. Fremont Math/Science Magnet High School in South-Central Los Angeles.

Special Thanks To:

Dr. Bill Younglove, California State University, Long Beach.

Very Special Thanks To:

Leo & Flo Bretholz