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**Paul:** She was only 22. A few months previously, she had gotten married to the man of her dreams. Then came the arrests, the separation, and the terrible train ride to a place of unimaginable cruelty. A place where her mother, sister, and one-year-old niece are sent to their deaths upon arrival. A place where a few weeks later she would come to realize she was pregnant. In this place that was a death sentence, for this was Auschwitz. What miracles could happen in a place like this?

In 2005, the United Nations designated January 27th as International Holocaust Remembrance Day, with the stated goal to mobilize civil society for Holocaust remembrance and education in order to help prevent future acts of genocide. The date was selected as it was the day in 1945 when Auschwitz ceased operations as World War II drew to a close. In honor of this, we wanted to produce a special edition of the *If/When* podcast.

Hello, I'm your host, Paul Thies. On this episode, it was a very special privilege to sit down with Leslie Rosenthal of Toronto, Canada. During World War II, Leslie's mother, Miriam, was pregnant with him during her internment at Auschwitz in late 1944.

Amazingly, she and her unborn son escaped being selected for death. Miriam was then transferred to one of Dachau subcamps where Leslie was born at the end of February 1945. By a series of miraculous events, both Miriam and her infant son survived the war and were reunited with their husband and father, Bela.

In the following discussion, I asked Leslie to share with us his and his mother's extraordinary journey to life and freedom. Well, Leslie, thank you so much for joining us to talk about your story and your mother's story and just the miraculous things that happened around your birth and getting your family from Europe to Canada.

I wanted to sit down with you, especially as we prepare for International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and get your story. It's always important that people hear it afresh so that they know what has transpired and so that it never happens again.

Let me just start us off. For our listeners, can you tell us about your mother's journey from Hungary, where she met your father? Then through the war years at Auschwitz and at the sub-camp at Dachau, and ultimately to Canada, where your family landed and where you were raised?

**Leslie:** Well, sure. Thank you very much, Paul. I appreciate the opportunity for telling my mother's story and my story. It's just coincidentally her fifth anniversary of her passing will be this February the 16th. It's apropos just in her-- we say in Hebrew her [Hebrew language].

This is her story. Hopefully, that it will convey some of the experiences that I've had in growing up with the story. I've talked about this to children, grade 7 and grade 8 students in schools. The first question I ask always is, "How many of you have birth certificates?" Of course, everybody puts their hand up. "We have birth certificates." "Do you remember what hospital you were born in?" "Yes, we do." "Your doctors?" "Yes, we know the doctors." I said, "Well, in a concentration camp, I didn't have a

birth certificate. In fact, they didn't have birth certificates and they didn't have death certificates."

On my passport, the only thing that even comes close is the fact that it says my place of birth is Kaufering, K-A-U-F-E-R-I-N-G, DEU which was Deutschland, and the date is February 20th, 1945. On its own, it seems pretty sterile. Like saying North York, Ontario, Canada, which is a suburb of Toronto.

What isn't mentioned is Kaufering Lager 1, a concentration camp. There were 11 sub-camps in Dachau. I was born in Lager number 1. My mother was the youngest daughter among 14 brothers and sisters, born in 1922 in Komárno, Czechoslovakia to a family rich in Torah values. Her mother would send her brothers back to synagogue on Shabbat if they did not bring someone home for a Shabbat meal. She would say there must be someone in synagogue needing a Shabbat meal.

Their home was open to yeshiva students who needed a place to stay. Her father encouraged yeshiva students and rabbis to gather wheat from his farm and prepare flour to make Matzah for Passover. Matzah is unleavened bread. Her parents' farm was used to train pioneers in the use of farm equipment, how to farm and raise livestock in preparation for Alia going to Palestine in the 1930s. Her mother literally gave away her husband's clothing to the needy. No questions were asked.

My parents met via a matchmaker. My mother came from her hometown in Czechoslovakia and stayed at her sister's in Budapest. My father lived in Hungary, not far from Budapest in a small city called Chios St. Peter, and went there to meet her. After several meetings, they became engaged and quickly planned their wedding in 1943.

My mother's family tried to dissuade their marriage because of the dangerous situation but to no avail. They were in love, and the marriage would proceed. My father sent his own non-Jewish worker to Komárno in Czechoslovakia to smuggle my mother to Miskolc, Hungary to be married, a distance of more than 400 kilometers.

The border between Czechoslovakia and Hungary was closed. She was smuggled into Hungary on a passenger train disguised as a Christian youth. She wore a big cross on her neck, black clothing, and a veil around her head to reduce suspicion. This is a treacherous mission. If discovered, instant death would follow.

No one from my mother's family was at the huppah, which was the wedding. It took place on the evening of April the 5th 1944, a Wednesday, three days before Passover. Are you crazy getting married now Nazis all around? That day was the very day of the yellow star. In a show of defiance, she pinned a red rose over the big yellow star on her dress. They were in love, and que sera, sera. What will be, will be.

They lived together in the Miskolc's ghetto until June. In June 1944, they were separated, and my father was taken to the Carpathian Mountains as a slave laborer. My mother was taken with thousands of other Jewish prisoners stuffed into cattle cars to Auschwitz, a journey lasting several days, well over 400 kilometers. There was a little hole high up on the cattle car wall close to the ceiling to allow fresh air for the normal cargo of cattle, but crammed with hundreds of people in stench, it was not enough. People climbed on each other to try and get a breath of fresh air.

When the doors finally opened in Auschwitz, Birkenau, many had already succumbed to the squalor, filth, and hunger having been locked up with little or no food or water for many days. My mother found herself appearing before Josef Mengele, the angel of death for the selection process. Healthy and strong, she went to the rights and live for another day. Pregnant mothers and babies and the weak were sent to the left and to the gas chamber and death.

He was also looking for twins to do terrible experiments. Everything happened quickly. [Hebrew language] shouted the SS guards with their barking dogs. There were two lines, one for death, one to live another day. Jewish prisoners in striped uniforms ran to the trains and cried in German, "Give their kindred to their mama.

Give the babies to the grandparents or you will be smoke coming from those chimneys."

They had come to tell the newly arriving mothers that by giving their children to their mothers or mothers-in-law, at least a parent would be saved. The grandmothers with the babies went to the left into the gas chambers and eventually the crematorium. If the mothers held on to their children, they too would both be gassed.

Heads were shaved and the hair was piled in heaps by color of hair. Clothes and shoes were replaced with a striped gown. No underwear and wooden shoes. Numbers were tattooed on their arms. The Germans were dehumanizing the people hoping to bring them to the level of animals.

My mother was young, healthy, and beautiful. Prisoners who had been in Auschwitz a long time called her to get onto work groups that left Auschwitz, "Get out of here, if you can." At the beginning of July 1944, she was taken to Płaszów, a forced labor camp in Poland, again, by a cattle car, a distance of 100 kilometers from Auschwitz.

Then one day, she felt something moving in her belly and asked, "What's happening to me?" and only then realized that she was pregnant. If discovered, death was certain. How to hide it? She exchanged her prisoner gown with another woman for a larger size to help hide her pregnancy. "I was terribly scared and felt so alone. I was so hungry. Every day, so hungry," she said.

Her mother's face and her husband's smile began to fade in her memory. Her thoughts were starting to become dull. Now, she must not only fear for her life, but also for that of her baby. My mother was very lucky. There was a Polish Jewish kapo named **[unintelligible 00:11:11]**. A kapo is a concentration camp prisoner appointed by the SS guards to supervise forced labor. He needed 20 women in his squad to search through pillows and blankets of deported and murdered Jews. They would search for gold and jewels.

He said to my mother, "I chose you because you look like my daughter. She is dead." Somehow, he knew that my mother was pregnant. He snuck in a piece of sausage, cheese, bread, and potatoes, and even once, a boiled egg, something unthinkable in a concentration camp. This man was an exception among the many brutal kapos of Płaszów.

At the beginning of August 1944, Płaszów was evacuated because the allies are advancing and prisoners are returned to Auschwitz. Again, my mother was marched before Mengele for the selection process, and again, miraculously sent to the right. She told me that the Germans put bromine in their food and water. This chemical prevented women from menstruating, and that also made their stomach swell. This also helped hide her pregnancy.

Then one day at rollcall, an SS officer offered double portions of food to all pregnant women that would step out of line. My mother didn't. She felt that her mother sent her a message that it was a trick and not to step out. Sure enough, over 50 pregnant women stepped out, and they were all gassed.

In September 1944, my mother was sent to work in Augsburg, Germany, almost 900 kilometers away in a Messerschmitt factory, making parts for airplanes. There were 500 other women and political prisoners there. One day, she noticed through the window, an apple tree, and being pregnant and always hungry, asked the fellow political prisoner who had more freedom to get around, if he could pick it for her. He did and hid it in the latrine. She retrieved it and savored every bite.

The situation in Augsburg was not great, but much better than in Auschwitz. In December of 1944, two German officers, while on a routine inspection, discovered her pregnancy. My mother was seven months pregnant. "Ah, du bist schwanger, du bist schwanger, du schwein. Oh, you're pregnant, you're pregnant, you pig. We are taking you back to Auschwitz for extermination."

The two Germans and my mother traveled together on a regular passenger train with German citizen all properly attired at one stop, and the German officers went out for a smoke. The lady opposite my mother asked, "Was ist dir passiert?" "What's happened to you?" My mother, for the first time, saw her own reflection. She looked like a monkey, shaved head and skinny as a rake, wearing inmate clothing with the big letters KZ on the back, **[unintelligible 00:14:15]**. "Don't you know," she said, "they're killing Jews."

The two SS officers returned and said, "You are lucky. Auschwitz is being bombed. You are being turned over to the concentration camp in Kaufering." Kaufering consisted of 11 sub-camps, the main camp Dachau. Kaufering prisoners were used as slave laborers to build huge underground bunkers. These had cement walls several feet thick. These caverns were used to build the German Messerschmitt planes.

Upon entering the barracks, which were triangular or domed in shape, and partially underground, my mother discovered six other pregnant Hungarian women who were placed there from Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. They hugged each other and cried. Why these other mothers were there to begin with is a mystery. They called themselves the Schwanger Kommando, the Pregnant Battalion. They worked in the laundry and the kitchen.

In December of 1944, the pregnant mothers began delivering their babies. All were healthy babies. Boeszi Legmann, the eldest of the mothers, delivered first. It was freezing cold, and **[unintelligible 00:15:28]**, the Kapo, smuggled the small wood stove into the barracks to provide heat. She was discovered and beaten to a pulp by

the SS officers. Guess what? She brought another stove in the very next day and stood up to these officers.

My mother was the last of the seven mothers to deliver. Dr. Vadasz, a gynecologist prisoner from the men's side, was sent to help in the deliveries. He had no instruments, no water. Nothing but his frail body. My mother had terrible labor pains for 48 hours. Dr. Vadasz kept yelling, "Push, Miriam. Push. You have to push." My mother had no strength. Dr. Vadasz lay on top of my mother and forced all his weight on her abdomen, and while shouting encouragement and pushing, my mother finally gave birth.

I weighed almost four and a half kilograms, bright blue eyes, and golden blonde hair. I looked like an **[unintelligible 00:16:28]**. The German officers joked that maybe she had relations with a German. A few days later, my mother developed a high fever and started to bleed very badly. The placenta did not come out. This became an emergency. Dr. Vadasz did a scraping with his bare hands. She came very close to dying at that very moment.

My mother was so sick and weak and could not breastfeed me. Boeszi, the first mother to deliver, nursed me and whoever else among the other babies that required it. Heinrich Himmler, Head of the SS was determined to exterminate all Jewish children. Himmler's famous speech on October the 6th, 1943 at Posen in Poland declared, "We came to the question, how is it with the women and children? I decided to find a solution here as well. I did not consider myself justified to exterminate just the men, that is to kill them or have them killed and allow the avengers of our sons and grandsons in the form of their children to grow up. The difficult decision had to be taken to make the people disappear from the earth."

In October of 1943, Himmler ordered the extermination of pregnant women and children. One and a half million babies and children were murdered by the Nazis, and seven healthy babies were born in a concentration camp. Hitler wanted the complete annihilation of the Jewish race.

The American army was converging, and on April 27th, the Nazis began evacuation of the sub-camps and forced prisoners to march or put them in open train cars to Dachau, the main concentration camp, where the plan was to gass everyone. A German soldier, seeing my extremely weak mother, offered to carry me. My mother asked him, "Why?" He replied, "You remind me of my daughter." My mother was able to get on a coal car behind the steam engine with me bundled in rags heading to Dachau.

The train was mistakenly attacked and bombed by allied air forces, not knowing that it was transporting prisoners from the various concentration camps. The engine was disabled, and my mother thinking this was the end, jumped off the coal car and ran into the woods. A new engine was brought to replace the bombed-out one and prisoners were rounded up, and those that tried to escape were shot.

The train continued through the city of Dachau with its human cargo and stopped in the city. There was no room in the camp to unload. They were not killing fast enough. Prisoners in Dachau were being slaughtered because the Nazis knew that the end of the war was nearing, and they wanted to kill as many as they could.

In the early morning of April 29th, 1945, Dachau was finally liberated by the American army. After seeing nothing but death all around, the soldiers could not believe their eyes when they saw seven mothers with their babies. Even at liberation, many prisoners died because of diseases such as typhus, also starving prisoners were given too much to eat too quickly.

Before being separated, my parents planned that if they survived, they would each return to their city. After regaining strength, my mother was driven by jeep with a doctor and a nurse to Prague and stayed for two to three days and onto Bratislava and then to her home in Komárno. The news of my mother and baby reached my father in Hungary. He immediately traveled to Komárno. So it was they met. My father was shocked to see his wife with a blue-eyed blonde-haired baby. My mother said, "It's ours. He has your ears."

Those who survived the Holocaust began to realize the extent of the disaster that befell them and their families and slowly started to put their lives together. In most cases, nothing remained of complete families or property and survivors left abroad. My mother's sister left Europe before the war, and with her husband, settled in Bowmansville on a small farm near Toronto. It was Toronto that my parents would eventually come.

Before finally leaving on the ocean liner, the SS Washington from France, they spent several months in Barbizon, an area close to Paris, in shelters that were arranged by an organization that rescued Jewish orphaned children.

We spent several months in Barbizon, France, and then sailed to New York. The entry papers were not in order, and we ended up in Cuba for about six months waiting for a visa. In 1947, we finally arrived to Toronto.

**Paul:** Wow. It's amazing because there were so many times in your mother's journey where she's being marched around and she's being sent here and things are getting bombed. So often she shouldn't have made it, but she did. Her whole life, and your life too for that matter, is just miraculous.

**Leslie:** Yes. Obviously, the hand of God was there. There's no question about that. People have asked her, "How can you believe in God?" People have died and it was horrible. Her answer was simply, "I brought a baby back from hell." It's a very personal thing, obviously. Everybody has a different take on this, and this was her. She came from a religious background as my father did as well. This is having a Munna as we say in Hebrew, having faith. This is I think what carried them through this so the terrible time.

**Paul:** Your father became a rabbi. Was it after the war when he landed in Canada or had he become a rabbi before leaving Europe?

**Leslie:** No, he wasn't. He was a very well-educated man and he got a position in-- when we came to Toronto in 1947, they were working in whatever they could get. Stuffing mattresses in the factory. My mother was doing some work in sewing. Eventually, an opportunity arose that my father would become a teacher and a rabbi in a small city north of Toronto called Timmins. Timmins is a mining town. It's about 600 miles. You think Toronto is cold, Timmins is close to North Pole.

**Paul:** Wow.

**Leslie:** We were there for two years then he became the rabbi there in the city and a teacher. Then from Timmins, they moved to a place called Sudbury. Then from Sudbury, we finally ended back in Toronto where my parents opened up a bookstore in 1956, a Judaica, which they had for 40 years.

**Paul:** Yes, it's like a landmark there in Toronto. Miriam's Judaica, right? It's quite the establishment for sure. Now, if you don't mind my asking, how did your mother come to peace with this and also your father? How did he maintain his faith despite the horrors that he saw as well?

**Leslie:** Not the simple answer. The only thing that comes to mind is the fact that they were believers in God and believers in the fact that whatever was destined to happen was the plan, the master plan. We can't understand the master plan, but we have to abide by it. Whether good or bad in the way we see things, it's always good in the eyes of God. In some sense, that's how I think how he reconciled or that's how it was reconciled.

On the other hand, my mother's brother lost his wife and children and he totally went the opposite way. Again, my mother and her brother came from the same family, saw the same upbringing, saw the same-- but they had a different view of things. It's very difficult to give a cause why this and why that.

**Paul:** I understand. You were the last of the seven Kaufeuring babies to be born?

**Leslie:** Yes.

**Paul:** I don't know, but it's quite possible that you're the youngest Holocaust survivor in the world or definitely at least one of the youngest, if not the youngest. How old were you when you learned the amazing story of your birth and how did you process all that?

**Leslie:** That's a very good question. I was probably in my early 20s. I remember as a youngster hearing about certain things, but really, it's way over your head. It didn't register. When I was in my 20s, I started really hearing more and more about it. I was being called, from time to time, a dirty Jew where we lived in up north and I didn't understand that.

I started asking questions. I started listening to the stories my mother was telling me. Especially people were starting to write about it. Not only did I hear it from my mother but I started reading about it. I think that's when it suddenly made an impression on me what was really happening, and the processing of it is still going on in my head. I think the way I look at it, I was there in body but not in mind.

Everything that I know is only what was told to me. I have no firsthand feeling of it. Although, as a baby in a womb, how much was pushed through to me, again, it's a very difficult position for me to be in. Like I said, I'm still processing it.

Many, many times I go on the internet and I look at these horrible pictures. To say that I was in a place like that, it was just amazing. In fact, in 2010, the six babies and myself, we reunited in Dachau for the 65th commemoration of Dachau. It was

amazing because, here we are, the seven babies getting together for the first time in 65 years. What a feeling that was.

**Paul:** I mean, another miracle, right? Just the fact that you all made it is just astounding.

**Leslie:** I think I mentioned that Boeszi Legmann, who was the mother that nursed me, my mother looked for her after the war. She spent 25 years looking for this lady through the Red Cross and finally found her in Brazil, Sao Paulo, and actually invited her to our wedding in Toronto in 1972 to which she came. It was very, very emotional and very, very beautiful.

**Paul:** Let me ask you, your parents have gone through this just unbelievable experience and come out on the other side and they have survived, they have lived, they're raising their family. What are some of the things that they taught you growing up about charity and tolerance and overcoming evil with love?

**Leslie:** All of those. This I think encapsulates who my mother was and who my parents were, and what was passed down to my generation, and what I hopefully passed onto my kids' generation. She wrote this. This was in 2010 as I mentioned before. It was the 65th commemoration of liberation Dachau which she did not attend but she made a homemade video and she made a speech. This is what she said, if I can read it.

**Paul:** Yes, please.

**Leslie:** I would like to send greetings to the staff at the Dachau Museum, to all survivors of Dachau, and sub-camps from all countries and their families. I would also like to send greetings to the young generation, to the dignitaries, to students of the Holocaust, and to the German citizens, Jews, and non-Jews, who are attending today.

I would like to thank Eva Gruberova and Sabine Xiang, the curators of the exhibition. I would like to thank Mrs. Gabrielle Hammerman for making the project possible and for inviting our children to participate in this overwhelming milestone. I would like to send special greetings to the seven children born in Kaufering who have gathered here from Canada, Brazil, Israel, Slovakia, Hungary, Tohana, Marakai, Judit, Aggie, George, Yossi, and my son Leslie.

We were seven **[unintelligible 00:30:09]** women who were like sisters. Although we were strangers, we helped each other. The SS called us the Sonderkommandos. Only Eva Fleischmanova in Slovakia and I in Canada remain today. The other five women were Elizabeth Leggman, who saved my son's life. Suri Hirsch, Dora Loewy, Magda Fenyvesi, and Ibolya Kovacs. Our children are at this memorial today to represent us.

The gathering today is memorial to those who perished. The American army liberated seven mothers and our babies in Dachau on April 29th 1945. Until today, I don't know why we were spared, why we were kept alive, when one and a half million Jewish children were killed by the Nazis. The Americans couldn't believe what they saw. In the midst of so much death, seven babies.

I send this message to the people of Germany, especially the young people, also politicians, educators, clergy. We must learn how to understand other suffering nations of the world. We must practice tolerance except our differences, skin, color, religion. We are all God's children. The young people must fight for democracy. Take an example from the young people of Iran. Because they wanted democracy, thousands of them were killed. Don't be afraid to speak up. Don't be complacent.

You have an example of the Hitler, who poisoned the people and taught them to hate and blame the Jews for everything. People believed him. I pray and hope that in your generation, the world will change. Thank you for listening to my message." It was delivered in Toronto, January 2010.

What she said here basically is understanding tolerance, education. Don't be ignorant. If you have any questions, learn about something. Just don't take things at face value, and dig. Understand what went on. I think that's the lesson that I heard, that I've been taught. Like I said, I'm passing this on to my children as well.

**Paul:** Wow. Well, Mr. Roosevelt, thank you so much for your time, for sharing your story, your mother's story. A remarkable tale of courage, and bravery, and love, and frankly, miracles. Lots of miracles to make this happen. I really just want to let how much I appreciate your time and thank you so much for sharing all this with us.

**Leslie:** You're very welcome. Thank you very much for having me.

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**[00:33:03] [END OF AUDIO]**