

LEAP INTO DARKNESS

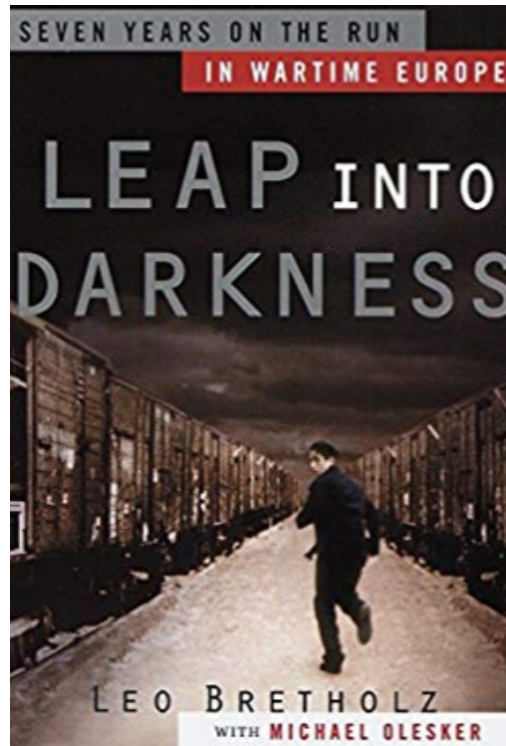
Screenplay by MICHAEL OLESKER

Story by LEO BRETHOLZ

and

MICHAEL OLESKER

Inspired by the memoir “Leap Into Darkness”



LEAP INTO DARKNESS - The Story

The screenplay for Leap into Darkness is based on the book, “Leap into Darkness: Seven Years on the Run in Wartime Europe,” by holocaust survivor Leo Bretholz and journalist Michael Olesker.

The book was originally published in Baltimore and received remarkable national reviews, leading to a bidding war among numerous national publishers. Then several European publishers bought rights, and the memoir was translated into several different languages.

The book was honored by the National Holocaust Museum, in Washington, D.C.

Leo Bretholz spent his post-war years in Baltimore, where he ran a series of book stores. That’s where he met Michael Olesker, who was an award-winning columnist for The Baltimore Sun and nightly commentator for WJZ-TV’s Eyewitness News, a CBS network affiliate.

Over the course of many months, the two men combined to tell Leo’s story.



LEAP INTO DARKNESS - Cast of Characters

LEO: Frightened Austrian teenage boy who is forced to run from the home of his mother and younger sisters in order to avoid capture by German soldiers.

SCHULTZ: Business-like operative of Ezra Committee human smuggling operation.

JOHANNES: Big, shambling monk who offers comfort to Leo as he enters temporary shelter of monastery.

UNCLE SAM: He and wife Mina take Leo in when he reaches Luxemburg and starts his long journey. A calming presence.

AUNT MINA: Uncle Leo's highly emotional wife.

LANDLADY: Stern woman who takes in lonely Leo after he escapes Luxemburg.

UNCLE DAVID: Overbearing, bullying uncle who gets his family out of Vienna – but not Leo's.

DORA BRETHOLZ: Leo's mother, frightened, overburdened with care for her two young daughters and the son she's forced to send into the unknown.

HEINZ: Suspicious German soldier who shares bedroom at monastery with Leo.

UNCLE MORITZ: Leo's uncle – who turns out to have a different identity.

BECKER: Driver for Ezra Committee smuggling operation who gets Leo into two different countries. Smart, savvy, first to stir Leo into growing into manhood.

JOSEPH: Distant cousin who becomes surrogate father figure for Leo during the war.

EDITH: Leo's younger sister.

EZRA OFFICIAL: Operative in smuggling operation.

RACHEL: Cousin Joseph's wife and a surrogate mother figure for Leo during war and then makes crucial connection for her daughters with a nunnery.

NETTY: Joseph and Rachel's sweet-natured younger daughter.

ANNY: Joseph and Rachel's older daughter, who falls in love with Leo.

LEON: Friend of Anny's who helps Leo escape through barbed wire at Rivesaltes holding camp. Self-assured beyond his years.

SIMA: Friend of Anny's who's living everyone's dream – she's going to America.

HILDE: Uncle David's daughter and Leo's cousin, who tries to calm him over the plight of his mother and sisters.

ALBERT HERSHKOWITZ: heavy-set, curly-haired, singer who rides train to Auschwitz but can't join in attempted escape.

KURT: Leo's insecure cousin, who's bullied by his father, Uncle David, until fateful moment at Rivesaltes.

DITTA: Leo's younger sister who is sick in the hospital when Leo flees town

GENDARME: authoritative, menacing, and increasingly lascivious

MENDEL SPIRA: middle-aged man with access to false I.D. papers.

SISTER ANTIONETTE: nun who helps hide Anny and Nettie at nunnery.

SCEAUX: a lean, Scandinavian-looking man in his 30s who helps Leo escape across the Swiss Alps.

SERGEANT ARRETAZ: cold, arrogant, full of himself

TONY: Cousin Leo discovers at Drancy holding camp, a reminder of their families' mutual destruction.

ERICH: Tony's husband

MANFRED SILBERWASSER: Cunning young man who escapes from freight train with Leo and accompanies him on journeys.

PRIEST: Puts Leo and Manfred up in church the night they jump the train.

AUNT ERNA: Leo's rather glamorous, pretty aunt who harbors him in Paris.

SALIOU: Leo's attorney

LIEBERTRAU: rough, slightly comical look. About 40, broken teeth and a gruff voice. Our first sense of him is menace, but then we begin to see lovable possibilities.

WERNER: 30s, he has a haunted look

BLANCHE ALEXANDER: 60s, a mother hen

RABBI DEUTSCH: mid-40s, the leader of the Resistance in Limoges, lanky, goateed

HELEN: Leo's cousin, who turns out to be someone else.

SISTER JOAN OF ARC: She offers comfort to Leo when he's hospitalized near war's end.

LEAP INTO DARKNESS - Summary

We open with typewriter keys clacking out an official death list: a thousand condemned human beings transported from a holding area in France to the Auschwitz concentration camp. The final name on the list of the dead is Leo Bretholz.

The story that follows is his rebuttal to the list.

Now comes a series of camera shutters and photographs: first, peaceful and bucolic Vienna before the war, and the Bretholz extended family within it. And then the same people, frightened, forced to leave their homes, desperately on the run as Nazi soldiers invade Austria and begin their campaign of torment and murder.

Leo's cousins, the Frajermauers, are seen on a street corner holding all the belongings that four people on the run can manage. Leo's uncle, David Fischman, kisses his wife and children goodbye as he heads into the unknown. Leo's uncle and aunt, the Goldsteins, leave their home. Leo's uncle, Moritz Topor, is beaten up by army stormtroopers at his clothing store as Leo and his cousins Sonja and Helen hide in terror. Leo's mother, Dora, and his two little sisters, Henny and Ditta, bid teenage Leo emotional farewell as he heads somewhere into the European darkness.

With swastikas hanging about, Leo leaves the Vienna train station and rides, with German soldiers nearby, to Trier, Germany. There he meets with a secret smuggling outfit, the Ezra Committee, which sends him to a temporary hiding place – a religious monastery, home to monks. In an eerie atmosphere, his roommate is a German soldier, Heinz, who has no knowledge of Leo's Judaism but has suspicions.

In a few days, Leo gets word he'll be picked up by someone from the Ezra Committee and taken somewhere safer. But he can't bring anything heavy. He asks the German soldier if he'll mail the luggage to an address Leo will send him. Leo doesn't realize – among the things he's leaving in the closed suitcase are religious artifacts.

On a rainy night, with uniformed soldiers all about, Leo is picked up on a street corner by Becker, from the Ezra Committee. Leo carries a small satchel. He's taken to a German Customs office at the edge of the Sauer River. He undergoes pressured questioning by the Germans. Anxious moments, until Leo is released. Then Becker takes him to the edge of the Sauer River, which has become swollen by incessant rains. Once shallow enough to wade across, Leo must now swim across its churning waters so he can leave Germany.

Fully clothed and clinging to his satchel, Leo struggles against the heavy Sauer's waters and makes it safely across. Becker waits on the other side. He drives Leo into Luxembourg, where his Aunt Mina and Uncle Sam Goldstein, in their tiny, temporary new apartment, wait to emotionally greet him.

Inside the monastery, Heinz the German soldier opens Leo's suitcase and finds religious items. He stands before a fireplace. He throws the items into the fire.

As Leo adapts to his new surroundings, other family members settle into theirs. Leo goes to a restaurant one morning, where he's arrested for having no proper papers. He's arrested and jailed. Then police give him a choice. Go back to Germany, or they can transport him to the nearby French border. Leo has an aunt who might take him in there.

At the French border, he learns there is a small enclave of young Jews hoping to go to Palestine. Hungry and thirsty, he approaches them for help. They eye him suspiciously. It could be a set-up. He assures he's one of them. But anxiety spoils the day – they turn him away.

Feeling overwhelmed and lonely, peering through windows into homes where families are happily together, Leo makes his way back to the Goldsteins in Luxembourg. They're relieved he's safe – but the Ezra Committee insists he's got to leave before he gets everyone into trouble.

Leo is taken to a home where he awaits orders with several refugees, waiting to be smuggled in the middle of the night into Brussels. As they wait anxiously, someone arrives – it's Becker, from the Ezra Committee. They cram into his small car – arguing comically over seating - and head out.

No one sleeps. They see a strange, overpowering light in the distant night sky. The next morning, in Belgium, they see newspaper headlines: "Night of Terror." "Thousands of Jews Pulled from Their Homes." That light in the sky was Kristallnacht, the German destruction of synagogues and Jewish homes and businesses.

Then Leo is told he must be moved again – this time, to Antwerp, where he links up again with the Ezra Committee, and is told where to find his meals. There, in line for food, he hears a familiar voice, his Uncle David Fischmann. In the war's confusion, not even family members knew where others were heading. Leo asks about Uncle David's wife and teenage children. Uncle David is evasive.

Uncle David helps Leo find a room where he can stay. Leo is all alone in a bleak room, though he hears nearby revelers. In a few days, Uncle David takes him to meet the Frajermaiers, distant cousins including two daughters, Nettie and Anny.

Anny and Leo bond. She takes Leo to a party, where American music is played and there's much talk of escape to America. They talk with a fellow named Leon Oesterreicher. Anny asks Leo about his plans. Leo says he goes wherever he's told to go. Anny asks when he's going to take control of his own life.

Anny and Leo walk the streets of Antwerp together. Leo talks about his late father, and his Uncle Moritz who stepped in and became a father figure to him while he was growing up. He mentions Moritz's daughters, who hid in the clothing store with Leo when stormtroopers barged in and beat up Uncle Moritz. Where are they all now? No one knows. Anny notices a bracelet Leo wears. It was his late father's. It's all that's left of him.

One morning Leo and Uncle David meet. Leo's gotten a letter from his mother. She says she's safe, though we've gotten an earlier glimpse at her walking the dangerous streets back home. Uncle David has his own news – his wife and two daughters are coming to Antwerp.

Leo can't believe it. Why didn't Uncle David say something? Leo kept asking about them. And why didn't he do anything to help bring Leo's mother and sisters out, too? Uncle David has no answers.

Uncle David's wife, Olga, arrives with their two teenage children, Hilde and Kurt. Leo tells Hilde he's angry that Uncle David didn't help Leo's family get away. Hilde says not to be angry, Uncle David had to leave behind his own mother – that's how bad things have gotten.

Leo settles in. He lines up, in chilly weather, at a public shower. He receives mail from his mother. He grows closer to Anny. And he gets a letter – from the German soldier Heinz, with

whom he left behind his suitcase with religious items in it. The letter is terse: Heinz has burned all the contents.

Leo and Anny go for a bike ride. Leo feels the beginnings of a hernia. One evening they go to a youth club and meet up with Albert Hershkowitz, another cousin through marriage, who is a singer. Leon Oesterreicher joins them. There's much hopeful talk of escaping to America. Annie wants to dance. Leo tells her he has a hernia. He's going to get it operated on.

Morning at the hospital, Leo awaiting surgery, the sudden wail of air raid sirens and bombs exploding. Chaos in the hospital ward. Orders to "leave the hospital if you can." Leo stumbles outside, violent blasts all around, as he painfully makes his way through the streets.

He arrives at Frajermauer home later that morning. The family's shaken. Then, on the radio, a grim announcement: all aliens have to report to the police; all are now suspects as spies or traitors.

Mass confusion at police headquarters. People trying to convince police they're not the enemy. They're all transported to trains. There, Leo meets up with Uncle David and his son Kurt. Explosions all around. Train moves out of city, into countryside, to a beach at St. Cyprien.

There, on the beach, multitudes of prisoners are kept between barbed wire and the Mediterranean Sea. Sweltering heat. Oppressive barracks, rancid food.

The Frajermauers are back on the road, along with many others, walking with all their possessions, trying to outrun the war, ducking to safety whenever planes fly over.

At St. Cyprien, Uncle David abuses Kurt. Leo gets a visitor. It's Leon Oesterreicher, who explains to him he can escape beneath barbed wire. Leo says it's impossible. Leon says he knows how to find Anny. Leo goes back to barracks, tells Uncle David and Kurt they can get out. Uncle David says he's crazy and warns submissive Kurt not to go along. Another prisoner overhears plan and starts to stop Leo. Kurt finally rouses courage and stands in the prisoner's way.

Leo meets Leon at barbed wire. Tortuous process, finally gets out. Leon hands him money and tells him where to go to find Anny and her family.

In Luchon, Leo jostles with crowd and finds a list of refugees – with Frajermauer name on it. At a nearby farmhouse, he finds the family. Much hugging and weeping. Leo moves in with them. One night father races in as dinner about to be served. He says German soldiers are coming. The family races out, hides in woods in nearby mountains.

In daylight, family descends out of the mountains. A wedding is taking place at a nearby church. Leo and Anny watch the wedding couple and hold each other's hands. Anny's mother notices a nun standing near the wedding couple. She and the nun make eye contact.

Back in the farmhouse the next evening, a letter has arrived from Leo's mother. It says she and Leo's sister Henny have been removed from their apartment – and little Ditta has been separated from them. Anny's mother, Rachel, tells her two girls to finish making dinner, she's got to run outside. Outside the church where she saw the wedding, Rachel walks up the steps to the big front door.

Later that evening, Anny locks Leo into an attic. He has to hide, since he has no papers. Later, noises in the hall. Anny tries to hold back a French gendarme who wants to search the attic. Leo crouches nervously behind the door. The gendarme bargains with Anny, then begins to have his way with her.

Leo has to leave because he's endangering the family. He leaves, walking through lonely roads, hoping to avoid authorities. He hooks up with Albert Hershkowitz – the distant cousin who sang at the youth club in Antwerp. They arrange to cross the Alps into Switzerland.

Leo and Albert make the trek across the Alps, bearing false papers. Meanwhile, Rachel Frajermauer goes back to the church and meets with the nun. Leo and Albert traverse the Alps, but they're stopped at the border and arrested by a cruel Swiss guard who doesn't believe their false I.D. papers. They beg for mercy and get nowhere. They're sent to a holding camp, an unfinished apartment complex, in the French suburb of Drancy, the last stop before Auschwitz.

Life at Drancy: miserable surroundings. Children crying, and no one who can help them. In a darkened room, Leo meets a cousin, Tony, and her husband, Eric, who has a bandaged leg. They talk of family. Everyone's disappeared. Rumors of death camps creep into conversations. Leo meets a young man on camp grounds, Manfred Silberwasser. They begin to talk of escape. They hear noises: a guard kills a mother and child.

The roundups begin for Auschwitz. Inmates are loaded on to trucks. They pass crowds in the streets, who seem to pay no attention. On Leo's truck, someone begins a song: the French national anthem. Voices are lifted. But no one in the streets seems to care. The voices drift away.

Freight trains for Auschwitz are loaded, children crying, adults forlorn. Inside Leo's train, darkness descends. Some pray. Others express fear or anger. Then a sound: someone is urinating. The train doesn't move. The single bucket designed to hold urine eventually overflows and covers the floor. Morning comes before the train finally moves.

Leo and Manfred stand near each other, with Albert Hershkowitz and Leo's cousins Tony and Eric nearby. They eye a window with iron bars across it. Could they squeeze through? Arguments over escape. Finally an old woman holding a child gives them the inspiration: They must go. Someone has to tell their story.

Leo and Manfred try to separate the bars on the window. They try using their sweaters as leverage. Then, an idea: give the sweaters traction by wetting them – using the urine collected on the floor.

Hours of struggle. Finally, a wide enough opening. Albert shakes his head no – he's too heavy to fit through. Tony won't go, because her husband Eric's leg is bad. Leo attempts to squeeze through. Slowly, slowly, he makes it. He's on the outside as the train moves through the darkened eastern Europe countryside. Soon Manfred joins him. They leap into the darkness.

A whistle blows and the train stops. Leo and Manfred lie silently in a marshy area. Guards and dogs. Nobody breathes. Then, another whistle, and the grinding of gears. The train leaves.

Leo and Manfred make their way to a little village. A priest puts them up for the night. In the morning they leave as guards come near. Resting later in a graveyard, Leo and Manfred discuss the war and ask where is God. At night they sleep in a barn, between cows.

They make their way to Paris, where they take in the street scenes: French women clinging to German soldiers, clowns bidding people into clubs, prostitutes. Life has to go on, even in the midst of killing. They make their way to Leo's Aunt Erna, who has an apartment.

Erna embraces the boys, who stay there for days but grow restless. Erna talks about her son, who is hiding somewhere, and her brother who has gone crazy from the war. Aunt Erna notices Leo's bracelet. She knows its history.

Leo tells Erna he wants to go back to Limoges to find Anny. She tells him he's crazy. He says Anny protected him, and now he wants to protect her. Manfred says he wants to find his brother and knows where to find him. Anny's all I have left, Leo says.

Inside a convent, Rachel Frajermauer takes the hands of the nun. Then she turns to Anny and Nettie, now dressed in the garb of religious novitiates. The girls will hide here.

Train ride. Then Manfred leaves to find his brother. He hands Leo a piece of paper. This is where his brother is staying, Manfred says. Leo takes the paper. At a later stop, he's grabbed by police. He's got another phony I.D. Taken to court, he leaps from a window and runs again. He's captured again, grimacing from his hernia, and taken to prison where guards beat him.

Leo spends months in prison, sharing a cell with a murderer. Then he's taken to a work camp. His hernia is worse. He escapes from a train headed for a tougher camp. And vanishes onto a crowded wartime street.

Leo arrives in Limoges. He finds the address Manfred gave him – it's the local resistance outfit. Leo is given a room with others. He spreads his few things out, and gazes at a photo of himself with Anny.

Outside a church, Rachel and Joseph Frajermauer wait nervously. The nun approaches, with Anny and Nettie. They've found a safer place to go. The daughters are now wearing civilian clothes.

Leo, in his room, gets a letter forwarded from London. It's from his cousin Helen. It's arrived via a resistance network. She writes to tell him a long-hidden story. His father wasn't really his father. His real father was his Uncle Moritz. Through all of his ordeal, Leo has been forced to change his identity repeatedly – and never knew what his real identity was.

The next day, Leo is sent on a mission – deliver false papers to people in hiding. On the street, he collapses from the hernia, long untreated. He wakes up in a hospital. A nun, Sister Joan of Arc, stands over him and says she will protect him. Later, they talk of the presence of God in the middle of war.

Night. Leo walks a street and finds the new Frajermauer home. Emotional gathering. Later Leo and Anny go off together. They sit amid war's rubble. They talk of their changed "identities" and their changed lives. What's their future? Leo wants to go back to work for the resistance. Anny wants him to stay with her. How does she know he'll come back? He takes from his wrist the bracelet given to him by his father and gives it to her.

At the resistance office, in the midst of a busy morning, comes a radio broadcast. The allies have landed in France. It's D-Day. The streets fill with people. Leaflets are dropped from planes, and youngsters climb trees to retrieve them. There's not a German soldier in sight.

The screen goes dark. An epilogue explains what happened to each character. Leo's name is last. The Germans listed him in their official records as one of those killed on the transport to Auschwitz.

"This story is his rebuttal," the epilogue says.



LEAP INTO DARKNESS - Comparables



Schindler's List (1993)

In German-occupied Poland during World War II, industrialist Oskar Schindler gradually becomes concerned for his Jewish workforce after witnessing their persecution by the Nazis.

Budget: \$22,000,000

Worldwide: \$322,243,445



The Pianist (2003)

A Polish Jewish musician struggles to survive the destruction of the Warsaw ghetto of World War II.

Budget: \$35,000,000

Worldwide: \$120,072,577



The Boy in the Striped Pajamas (2008)

Through the innocent eyes of Bruno, the eight-year-old son of the commandant at a German concentration camp, a forbidden friendship with a Jewish boy on the other side of the camp fence has startling and unexpected consequences.

Budget: \$12,500,000

Worldwide: \$40,416,563

LEAP INTO DARKNESS - The Team

Michael Olesker - Writer



Michael Olesker is well-known Baltimore writer, columnist and broadcast journalist. He has written about politics, race, police, poverty, education, economic disparity, prison reform, sports, and the life of American cities, for nearly half a century. For nearly 30 years, Olesker (pronounced o-LES-ker) was the award-winning metro columnist for the Baltimore Sun. For most of those years, he did broadcast journalism as well. He broadcast daily commentary over two Baltimore radio stations over a six-year period. Then, over 20 years, he did commentary five nights a week for WJZ-TV's Eyewitness News, the CBS affiliate in Baltimore.

Before joining The Sun, Olesker wrote for another Baltimore daily newspaper, The News American. He was an investigative reporter whose stories led to criminal convictions of political figures, uncovered police abuse and miserable prison conditions, exposed major drug dealers, and revealed charity rip-offs. For two years, he wrote a column for the Baltimore Examiner.

Over the course of his career, Olesker was nominated four times for a Pulitzer Prize, journalism's highest honor. He is the author of six books, four of them published by the Johns Hopkins University Press, which deal with social and political issues in Baltimore. He also wrote a book, "Tonight at Six: A Daily Show Masquerading as a TV News Program," about local television news.

Michael was also a visiting professor of journalism at Towson University, and he has given graduation speeches at numerous high schools and colleges, including the Johns Hopkins University."

Gabi Faye - Producer



Gabi discovered her affinity for producing shortly after moving to NYC, from her hometown Baltimore. Gabi can be seen commanding attention in front of the camera, or running a team from behind the scenes. She began producing in 2013 when her first music video "Building a Better Version" was released. She went on to executive produce two short films "Stripped" and "Dirty Girl" both of which shed light on the #MeToo movement. Dirty Girl's trailer was selected to play on Time Square's exclusive billboards in March of 2019.

Gabi's short films earned her offers to associate produce on several feature films including "Yes," (with Nolan Gould and Oscar Nunez) and "Love and Communication" (with Brianna Evigan and Ellen Adair).

Gabi is also a producer on new TV Pilot "Crimson City" (starring Broadway sensation Gail Bennett) and she is currently working as the assistant to the Producer on feature horror flick "The Retaliators" with a musician based cast including Five Finger Death Punch and Papa Roach. The film also stars Marc Machaca and Joe Gatt. Additionally, Gabi served as a producing consultant on "Mott Haven" (starring Robert Davi and Paul Wilson) To learn more about Gabi visit www.gabifaye.com

Cameron Ring- Producer



Cameron started out in the world of politics, working as a legislative assistant and campaign manager. At 25, he experienced a quarter life crisis and decided to follow his dreams reckless abandon, quit his job and moved to New York with just a backpack.

There he starred in both theater and film productions including "Prophet: The Story of Nat Turner"; "The Thurgood Marshall Story"; and "From Man to Superman". Soon Cameron

realized the power of cinema in telling stories, and he wanted to use that power to tell stories that matter.

His first film, called Awesome Gal, was inspired by his rescued horse and would go on to win 6 awards through a hefty film festival run. The project was also influential in passing a major piece of legislation, the Past Act. After the success of Awesome Gal, Cameron teamed up with Gabi to continue making meaningful projects.

LEAP INTO DARKNESS: CONTACT INFORMATION

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