

## MEET LESLIE



Leslie, Montreal, 1949.

### BIOGRAPHY:

Leslie was born in Hungary in July 1931 and was the youngest of five siblings. The Mezei family lived a simple life in the small town of Gödöllő, where Leslie went to school and spent time playing outdoors with his siblings. When the German army occupied Hungary in 1944, the Mezei family fled to Budapest. There the family was separated, and those remaining in Budapest were forced by the Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators to wear a yellow star and live in houses designated for Jews. In December 1944, when the Jews of Budapest were forced into a ghetto, Leslie and some of his family members managed to escape and pose as Hungarian refugees. Leslie and his family survived the bombing of the city during the Siege of Budapest. Following liberation in early 1945, Leslie's surviving family members decided to leave Hungary, which was now under the control of the Soviet Union. After trying and failing to immigrate to Palestine in 1947, Leslie came to Canada in January 1948 with the help of the War Orphans Project.

“There was a time when I thought that I was an impostor as a Holocaust survivor since I was never in the concentration camps or forced labour service. Putting the details of my story together made me realize that my very existence was threatened many times, and my life could easily have been snuffed out each of those times.”

—LESLIE MEZEI

Leslie Mezei is a Holocaust survivor who immigrated to Canada after the war and settled in Toronto. You can learn about his experiences by reading his memoir, *A Tapestry of Survival*, or on the digital resource Re:Collection.

Below is some background that will help you understand Leslie's story.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Leslie's family lived in **Hungary**, a country in Central Europe located southeast of Germany. By the twentieth century, Hungary had a large Jewish population, many of whom had lived in Hungary for generations. In the years leading up to **World War II** and the **Holocaust**, Jews in Hungary experienced rising **discrimination** from the Hungarian government. During the early years of the war, the Hungarian government was an **ally of Nazi Germany** and discriminated against Hungarian Jews but did not deport them to Nazi camps. This changed in **March 1944**, when the alliance between Hungary and Germany broke down and the **German army occupied Hungary**. Immediately, **persecution** of Hungarian Jews increased, and the Jewish population was forced into **ghettos** and deported to **Nazi camps**, where most were killed on arrival. In the capital city of Budapest, Jews were marked with a yellow star, were forced to live in Jewish apartment buildings and then in a ghetto, and were terrorized by Nazis and their Hungarian collaborators. After the **Siege of Budapest** — the two-month battle between the Soviet and Romanian armies on one side and the German and Hungarian armies on the other side — Hungary was gradually liberated by the Soviet army in early 1945. **Approximately 569,000 Hungarian Jews were killed** in the Holocaust, most of them at the **Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp**, including Leslie's father.

