

“Journey From Darkness to Hope and Freedom”

This article is from the “Edifying the Body” section of the Church of God Big Sandy’s website (churchofbigandy). It was posted for the weekend of March 30, 2024. (A version of the article was posted at jpost.com on March 28.)

By Eve Young

JERUSALEM, Israel—Gabriela Leimberg had been released from Hamas captivity for nearly 80 days when she received a phone call at 3:20 a.m. from the IDF officer handling her family’s case. The officer quickly reassured her that it was good news, knowing that for Gabriela (whose family members Louis and Fernando were still in captivity) a middle-of-the night phone call from the military was stressful, to say the least.

“We have them. They will be at Tel Hashomer in 30 minutes,” was all the officer told her.

Louis and Fernando had been rescued in a daring IDF operation in Gaza, freeing them from the Hamas apartment-turned-cell they had previously shared with Leimberg, her daughter Mia, sister Clara and tiny dog Bella.

Leimberg was shocked, and it took her a while to understand what she was being told.

“Are they okay?” she asked the officer. “Who else is coming back?”

“It is something we didn’t imagine, certainly when we were in [captivity in Gaza],” she explained to *The Jerusalem Post*, saying they thought that a rescue mission was impossible and would have led to the death of the hostages.

Leimberg and her family members had been taken from her sister’s bomb shelter on the southern kibbutz of Nir Yitzhak on Oct. 7. Leimberg and her daughter had been visiting her sister and planned to leave the kibbutz on Saturday morning. The rocket alerts that started sounding early kept them from leaving.

The alarms weren’t new to Leimberg, who regularly visited her sister, but this incident felt different because of the number of alarms and the messages from the kibbutz telling them to close themselves in their homes and stay in their shelters.

They learned about the infiltration of Hamas terrorists from Gaza on the news, where Leimberg says they started seeing what was happening in Sderot and kibbutz Be'eri.

"The moment we realized it had reached us was when my sister got a message from her neighbor over WhatsApp that terrorists were inside her house," she said.

Realizing that terrorists might also try to come into their shelter, Leimberg and her family tried to block the door with a stick and a chair, but to no avail.

Terrorists opened the door and shot into the room before taking them to a white pickup truck that drove them to Gaza.

Family's terrifying Hamas captivity ordeal

Leimberg, her brother Fernando Marman, sister Clara Marman, daughter Mia, and sister's partner Louis Har, were taken from the truck to a building, where they entered a narrow tunnel in which they were forced to walk for around two hours. They climbed from the tunnel into an animal pen, and, for the first time, she noticed that her daughter Mia had her dog Bella with her.

The family was moved from the pen to another building, and from there to a car that drove them through the city and to an empty apartment. "That is where it started: that nightmare of being in captivity, of not knowing what will happen," she said.

Their Hamas captors gave them a rough idea of what was going on in Israel, how many had been killed, and how many were taken hostage, but they had no way to confirm whether it was true.

The family knew they were constantly in danger, and the Israeli bombardments were incredibly hard to bear, the released hostage said. Their captors also warned them against making noise so that locals would not know there were Israelis in the apartment and attempt to harm them.

"They were guarding us because they wanted a deal, otherwise they wouldn't have kept us for so long in a home, fed us and taken care of us. At the end of the day, they didn't kill us—they wanted us alive—but you can't know what will happen," Leimberg said, describing the terrible feeling that anything could happen to them in captivity.

"Your life is in danger. You can die at any moment—that is the fear. You're locked up and you can't make any decision. Not opening the window, not if you breathe, not if you get fresh air, not if you see light, not what you eat, nothing," she described.

Captivity ordeal: hope amid despair

The conditions in captivity got worse with time, with almost no water and less and less food. "We understood that they didn't have anything. It wasn't that

they were trying to deprive us, there just wasn't anything and that was the situation," she recalled.

Leimberg also talked about the fear she felt being in captivity with her daughter Mia. "Luckily we were always together. There was not a moment she was not in our eyesight, but there is the fear that it could be different," she said, adding that she knew she would resist anyone trying to harm Mia, but couldn't know that she would be able to keep her safe.

In November, their captors allowed them to watch the first hostage releases on TV and told them that it might soon be their turn to be released, but they would only find out the same morning.

Watching the hostage release on TV was how Leimberg and her family found out just how many people had been taken, and how many elderly and children were among them.

"Mia used to always say, 'I must be the youngest person they attacked,' " said Leimberg, who added that Louis thought he must be the oldest. Through the exchanges, they learned that children had been taken and that many older women were also abducted.

As the fourth day of the deal arrived, which they were told was to be the last, they were not released. This was devastating for the family until they were updated that the ceasefire and the hostage release might continue.

The ceasefire held and the hostage release continued into a fifth day, on which Clara, Mia and Gabriela got the wonderful news that they were to be released, but were told at the same time that Fernando and Louis would be staying behind.

They anticipated that this could happen from seeing the other releases, in which almost no men were freed, but "wanted to believe" that Fernando and Louis might leave with them, said Leimberg. They told themselves that maybe the ceasefire would continue, and their men would soon be freed.

This hope accompanied them through their good-byes to Fernando and Louis, who Leimberg says did all they could to make it easier for them to leave.

Captivity miracle

"They tried to give us as good a feeling as possible," she said, adding that the release of the women not only meant that their lives would be saved, but that they could also tell others back in Israel that Fernando and Louis were still alive and held hostage.

There was the happiness of being released, of returning to their family and home, but it came with the immense pain of knowing it was not complete, that Fernando and Louis stayed behind.

As the days since they were freed went by, Leimberg realized that nothing

was happening and that there was no additional deal. She joined the fight to free the hostages, and, after weeks with no news, she got the call in the middle of the night. "It was a miracle," she said. "A miracle that we were released and a miracle that there was the rescue."

Immediately after she was informed of the rescue, Gabriela left her home for the hospital to meet her freed family members. When asked how it felt to meet them after their long captivity, it seemed hard for her to find the right words. "Incredibly exciting . . . incredibly exciting," she said. "To understand that this nightmare, in my family, in our personal life is over. It's really hard to imagine that we made it to that moment."

"What happened to us must happen to all the families," the former captive said. "That hug, of getting your loved ones back . . . we can't stop doing the impossible for one moment to make that happen."

We need to find solutions and ideas where there are none, and give what it takes, Leimberg said. "I think, and I think that everyone should support the idea, that the most important thing is to bring back the hostages," she added, saying that all the rest can wait.

"Everyone involved needs to imagine that it is their daughter, brother, mother or father who is there. That is what should guide this—the idea that the people there are our brothers, our sons, our parents, and we need to bring them back."

"I don't want to think of the nightmare" they are going through. "I went through that nightmare 53 days, and my brother and Louis went through it 129 days," she said. "It's been nearly half a year. This can't be—enough."

Leimberg's return to life after captivity has been slow and completed in stages, she explained. "Our body is okay, but our soul isn't," she said, explaining that they could only really start the process of healing after Fernando's and Louis's release—and, even then, not totally.

"I can't disconnect from the other families. I can't and don't want to," she said. "I think they should get all of our support."

"The government is responsible for the return of the hostages. The words and the hope are not enough—they need to take action, that is what I expect."

Leimberg hopes to slowly get back to her job and activities from before the war, although she says that the abduction and captivity will accompany her for the rest of her life.

She also hopes to see the country come together. "I hope that this terrible thing that has happened to us will connect us, because I think that this terrible thing that happened to us on Oct. 7 is the result of what has been happening to us recently as a society.

"I think that is the only way and the right way: to be united. And maybe we will succeed" in doing this "with our neighbors as well."